

METHODIST CHURCH REPORTS

Special Report 2000

The Scottish Church Initiative For Union (SCIFU) Second Interim Report

The Methodist Church has been involved in the Scottish Church Initiative for Union with the Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church in Scotland and the United Reformed Church (united since 1 April with the Scottish Congregational Union which has also been a participant in the process). This Second Interim Report responds to the comments made by the Churches to the first Interim Report in 1998. There will be full discussion of it in Scotland but it is important that the Methodist Church response is on behalf of the whole Connexion. The summary therefore comes to the Council so that it can be forwarded to the Conference. If Council agrees the resolutions at Conference will direct the Scotland and Shetland Synods and the Faith and Order Committee to consider it and, working together, offer a Methodist response. It comes in summary form because it is not the intention either in the Council or in the Conference that there should be full discussion of the substance of a report that runs to nearly 35 A4 pages.

In response to the first Interim Report of the SCIFU Group in 1998 many questions and issues were raised. This Second Interim Report is presented in the hope that it will contribute to further continued in-depth discussion about church union. This second report does not repeat the content of the first and has to be read in conjunction with it. The substance of both interim reports will be incorporated in the final report. (Paras 1 & 2)

The Nature and Purpose of the Church (para 4) must be considered before matters of unity and mission. The Church is called into being by God as the "body of Christ". As such, the Church takes its proper place in reflecting and embodying the ministry of Christ to the world. This gives the church its essential "oneness", its unity. It is called into being to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ; and through the community of the Church the faith is handed from generation to generation. It is this faithfulness to the Gospel that makes the Church truly apostolic. Called to proclaim God's mercy to humanity and to invite all people to praise and glorify God, the Church's purpose becomes Mission. Mission seeks to "reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ", and involves a ministry of service and preaching together with a commitment to be good stewards of creation. (Para 4)

Why Union? (Paras 5,11,15) While it is clear that many do not see the purpose of union and feel that more co-operation at local level would in time take care of it, the SCIFU Group do not see these as alternatives. All the churches have consistently, and over many years, encouraged greater co-operation at local level and this has borne fruit. In those places where this has happened, congregations are finding the continued separation of the churches inhibiting and a cause for frustration.

There are three responses to the question.

(1) The search for union can be claimed as a biblical imperative. The epistles point to the need to show what it means to be one in Christ (eg. Eph.2:14; Eph.2:21-22; Eph.4:4-6). Again, a church which cannot contain its diversity and divides, fails to reflect the relationship of unity between Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit (Jn.17:20-21), and gives a counter witness to the Gospel. Unity is about being better equipped to share and participate in the mission of Christ to the world (Rom.12:1-8; I Cor.12-13), and is the way in which the Church is to facilitate God's purpose (Col.1:18-20).

(2) Historically, each division in the Church has led to our traditions being shaped in opposition to each other with something important for the whole life of the Church being preserved in each. With a Gospel that has at its heart a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is important to find ways of demonstrating what reconciliation means for us. Simply increasing the amount of co-operation among the churches does not take seriously enough the failure of witness that is made by a divided Church.

A church in fractions cannot effectively help the people of Scotland as they seek a way to articulate how they feel

- amid questions of identity and relationship with the rest of the world
- when Churches are a minority - one among many - seeking to shape the characteristic values of our land
- when there is a renewed awareness of a spiritual dimension

In such a context we recognise a responsibility to the nation. Especially at a time of change we need to ask what kind of church would best serve the people of Scotland.

A united Church in Scotland would be no less committed to ecumenical co-operation in Scotland. Other Scottish Churches in ACTS not part of the present process, and the Baptist Union, have welcomed the present initiative. After a union, links would remain with all the appropriate international confessional bodies as well as the ecumenical bodies as at present.

What is the meaning of Mission? (Para 6) From their worship of God, members are sent out to engage in mission, both as individuals and as a community. All the participating churches include people with widely differing understanding of what mission means and a united Church will be no different. Definitions of mission should be wide enough to incorporate that diversity. The Group offers two definitions as a framework for an understanding of mission in a united Church.

The first is one drafted by Churches Together in England in 1997 and since incorporated by the United Reformed Church in its mission strategy in 1999. It comprises 5 marks of mission:

- To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom;
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
- to respond to human need by loving service;

- to seek to transform unjust structures of society;
- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The second is a definition of Mission taken from the late David Bosch's book "Transforming Mission" which was used in the formulation of the Scottish Congregational Church's mission strategy. "Mission is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world."

Historic Statements of Faith (Para 7) Questions were asked within the Church of Scotland about the Westminster Confession of Faith. Within all the participating churches there are documents and statements, which are used by the respective churches to define themselves historically and to affirm their current understanding of the Christian Faith. All of these will need to be noted by a united Church and given due weight. While all the defining documents will need to be listed in the Basis of Union in order to maintain continuity, this in itself will not create a theological identity for the united Church. To accomplish this the uniting churches could accept the work already done in multilateral conversations as sufficient to enable agreement on the core of the faith and leave to the united Church the task of appointing a commission to prepare a formal Confession of Faith for the 21st century. Alternatively, the possibility of a new truly ecumenical Scots confession could be pursued, perhaps through the agency of ACTS, whose Faith and Order Commission has been asked to explore just such a possibility.

Leadership Issues (Para 8 and appendices I II and III) Focussing first on the Eldership, it is reaffirmed, as stated in the first Interim Report, that the office of elder would continue in the united Church, and clear guidelines will be given to ensure the continued ordination of people to the eldership. (At the same time, the SCIFU process will have to take account of current discussions in the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine about the question of ordination to the Eldership.) In the local Church, along with the Church Meeting and the maxi-parish council, the Elders' Meeting would be part of the structure. Every worship centre would have a nucleus of key people who would be elders. Along with continuity, development is essential, and the eldership that is carried forward must be relevant to a new century. Many Kirk Sessions already have experimented with new ways of organising their leadership.

Turning to **Ministry**, it is also reaffirmed that congregations will continue to have no less a say in calling a minister than they have at present. There will be a parity of ministers in the united Church and ministers will exercise their ministry within the whole ministry of the people of God. The structures of accountability between personal and conciliar are intended to keep the balance between individuals and the community of believers. There needs to be an agreed Scottish statement on what we mean by oversight or episcopate. At a local level oversight is exercised by the minister and by the council (whatever called) of the local Church. At regional level this is exercised in a personal way by the bishop and in a conciliar way by the regional council. Through the due processes of the church, the call of God for certain individuals to have authority vested in them for the purpose of building up the church in its missionary vocation is recognised - but they are not set above the community.

In considering the role of the bishop, particular emphasis has been laid on the Teaching Ministry and this is set out in detail in Appendix II of the Report. The work generally (Appendix III) would concentrate on pastoral care of clergy and of congregations, on leadership in mission, and on administration. An

important point to be made is that a united Church would be episcopally led but synodically governed. The bishop has "...a special responsibility for fostering the spontaneous, unpredictable and uncomfortable gift of prophecy... to look out for needs that are not being met, disproportions of vision or action, gifts of the Spirit that are not being used, new possibilities of outreach, of growth, of presenting the Gospel to the public." The bishop would have a central role in ordination. The Group, however, believe this is the time for consideration to be given to including both elders and lay people in the laying on of hands so as to express visibly that the whole Church is involved in the act of ordination.

Structures (Para 9 and Appendix IV) The Group see clearly three groupings - local, regional and national.

At local level, it is envisaged that there will be a grouping of congregations - "worship centres" - in a "maxi-parish" with a team ministry. In the worship centres, there would be meetings of the whole Church from time to time to consider policy and the life of the centre. Leadership would be exercised by the centre council, which would be the elders. The worship centres would be responsible for their own worship and fellowship, finance and property, within the overall policy and life of the maxi-parish. The maxi-parish would be led by a council nominated by and from the worship centre councils and including the ministry team. Its principal role would be initiating and co-ordinating outreach and mission for the whole community and the provision of resources to support the work of the whole parish. Although not every congregation would be in a position to be part of a maxi-parish, the Group believes that such a model would immeasurably strengthen the Church's life and work, both in urban and rural areas, by: supporting smaller worship centres; support for clergy; employment of lay specialists in ministry teams; by developing and diversifying worship and disseminating new and best practice.

At regional level, there would be a council representing groupings of local units of maxi-parishes and other congregations. Its membership would comprise those appointed from local level and the bishop would operate at this level. She or he would be elected by the regional council. The regional council would determine and implement pastoral and mission policies at regional level and provide opportunities for fellowship and participation in the church in a wider area than the local parish. Its role would include encouraging, co-ordinating, and supporting local units in their mission. It would provide oversight and pastoral care for congregations and clergy. It would be responsible for the ordination and induction of ministers and would be the administrative link between national and local levels.

The national council would comprise lay members and clergy nominated by regional councils, serving bishops, one representative of each standing committee, the council's office-bearers, and those who have previously chaired the national council. It would declare the mind of the Church, consider and adopt policies, appoint committees as necessary and receive reports on work done, act as final court of appeal in matters of discipline, order and doctrine, inspire and encourage the Church, and direct strategy for mission at national level. It would meet annually or as determined by itself.

Buildings (para 12) More thought has still to be given to the question of keeping or closing buildings. It would be the Group's present view that decisions on these matters should rest principally at the local level, although consideration of wider Church perspectives must also have their place.

A Top-Down Initiative? (para 13) The Group is sensitive to the feelings expressed of the initiative being imposed. The authoritative bodies in each church (Assemblies, Synods etc) which agreed to the SCIFU process are all made up of grass-roots representatives. In addition, the denominations themselves are being pressed by the local ecumenical initiatives to reflect that experience of co-operation and union in their relations with others. The churches, through SCIFU, need both to exercise leadership in offering a way forward and also to facilitate those initiatives which are springing up at grassroots level. All levels, and not just 'top' or 'bottom', must participate in seeking the mind of Christ for the unity of his Church.

Timescale (para 14) It is anticipated that by 2002 a document will be prepared on the basis of which the participating Churches will be asked to decide to go forward to union or not. This decision-making will take at least 18 months since most, if not all, the churches require decisions in two consecutive years as well as a process of consultation and agreement at presbyteries, dioceses, districts and circuits. If the answer is positive, a process would then start to organise in detail for bringing the churches together. The actual date for effective union should be by the end of the year 2010.