

## 2. THE UNITY WE HAVE AND THE UNITY WE SEEK

In this chapter, we take our cue from the title of a recent collection of essays from various Christian traditions on the prospects for the ecumenical movement in the twenty-first century: *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek*.<sup>1</sup> As that title suggests, we want to explore the paradox of unity that we are experiencing in a covenant such as ours. The Covenant is an expression of unity and itself generates deeper unity. Yet within the Covenant we are committed to working for a fuller unity than the Covenant itself assumes. We know that we are united in a covenant, which is a serious commitment, yet we remain apart in various ways. We both have and have not unity.

For the past century, Christ's prayer in John 17.21 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be [one] in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' has been understood as speaking of unity in mission. The Methodist Conference Statement on the Church *Called to Love and Praise* says: 'We must begin from the premiss that the prayer of Jesus has been heard. So his prayer creates unity: Churches are already one in Christ ... Yet the responsibility remains of responding to the prayer of Jesus, since divisions – and denominations – are a visible denial of that fundamental unity' (3.1.2).<sup>2</sup>

Under the Covenant we have a real and visible expression of the unity of the Church of Christ. The Covenant has already proved to be a catalyst for unity in mission between Methodists and Anglicans in many situations (as our two interim reports have shown). The Covenant builds on the baptismal unity (mutual recognition of baptism; common baptism) that is one of the foundations of the ecumenical movement today. Baptism unites not only individual Christians in Christ (Romans 6.3-4; 1 Corinthians 12.13), but binds together the whole Body (Ephesians 5.25-27). The Covenant is an expression of our shared communion (*koinonia*) with the Father and the Son (1 John 1.3), the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13.13).

So our unity under the Covenant is not entirely something that still remains to be achieved, something that only lies ahead of us. It is already

---

1 J. Morris and N. Sagovsky, eds, *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek: Ecumenical Prospects for the Third Millennium* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003).

2 Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999.

a reality, a present possession, a gift received. The Covenant was seen by our own churches and by ecumenical partner churches as a significant step in terms of the unity of the whole Church. That is something to rejoice in and to be thankful for. The unity we have is set out in the terms of the Covenant itself (*An Anglican–Methodist Covenant*:194, consisting of the Preamble, the Affirmations and the Commitments) in specific ways. It is worth reminding ourselves of these.

In the Covenant we have affirmed one another's churches as 'true churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as truly participating in the apostolic mission...'. We have affirmed that 'in both our churches the word of God is authentically preached and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are duly administered and celebrated'. We have affirmed that both our churches 'confess in word and life the apostolic faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the ecumenical Creeds'. We have gone on to affirm the authenticity of one another's ordained and lay ministries as bearing Christ's commission and the authenticity of the ministries of oversight in both our churches. In our covenant relationship, our unity is already expressed in many forms of shared ministry and mission.

Nevertheless, the Covenant is only a beginning: the vision of fuller visible unity still lies before us. In the Commitments our churches have pledged themselves to work to overcome the remaining obstacles to fuller visible unity, to realise more deeply their common life and mission and to bring about a closer collaboration in all areas of witness and service in a needy world, including through joint or shared oversight and decision making. It is clear from the terms of the Covenant that a deeper unity does indeed remain to be received from God. It is that deeper unity that lies beyond our present experience that we wish to explore in this chapter. *The Grace Given You in Christ*, the report of the international Methodist – Roman Catholic dialogue, sets the right tone:

What then is the Church's deepest and hidden reality, the mystery that lies at the heart of its nature and mission? It is the invisible presence of the Triune God, the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the God who is Holy Love. As Pope Paul VI said, 'The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.' The Church is a fruit of God's grace, and its nature and mission cannot

be understood apart from the mystery of God's loving plan for the salvation of all humanity.<sup>3</sup>

### **The vision of unity**

The over-arching horizon for all unity-talk is the visible unity of the whole Church, the one Church of Jesus Christ. We have seen in our chapter on the nature of unity that a major impetus to unity came from the demands of 'the mission field' for a united witness in the presence of other faiths. The imperative of a visibly united testimony to the world has remained the guiding thread of the ecumenical movement, from the Edinburgh International Missionary Conference of 1910 to the statement *Called to be the One Church* of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006. One of the first declarations of this vision was 'An Appeal to All Christian People', issued by the 1920 Lambeth Conference.<sup>4</sup> Addressing all baptised Christian believers throughout the Church, the Appeal stated:

We believe that God wills fellowship. By God's own act this fellowship was made in and through Jesus Christ, and its life is in his Spirit. We believe that it is God's purpose to manifest this fellowship, so far as this world is concerned, in an outward, visible and united society, holding one faith, having its own recognized officers, using God-given means of grace, and inspiring all its members to the world-wide service of the Kingdom of God.

The bishops added: 'This is what we mean by the Catholic Church.'

The Appeal pointed out that this united fellowship was not yet visible in the world. On the one hand were the ancient episcopal communions of East and West, 'to whom ours is bound by many ties of faith and tradition'. On the other hand were the 'great non-episcopal Communion, standing for rich elements of truth, liberty and life which might otherwise have been obscured or neglected'. With them, the bishops said, 'we are closely linked by many affinities, racial, historical and spiritual'.

---

3 *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists reflect further on the Church*; Report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (Lake Junaluska: World Methodist Council, 2006), 49 (p. 23).

4 Text in M. Kinnamon and B.E. Cope, eds, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 81-83.

Now we come to the heart of the Lambeth Appeal:

The vision which rises before us is that of a Church, genuinely Catholic, loyal to all Truth, and gathering into its fellowship all ‘who profess and call themselves Christians’, within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common, and be made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ.

The vision was of diversity in communion: communities long separated would retain what was precious to them, for ‘it is through a rich diversity of life and devotion that the unity of the whole fellowship will be fulfilled.’

The Appeal went on to restate the ‘Lambeth Quadrilateral’ of 1888, itself based on the ‘Chicago Quadrilateral’ of two years earlier. The bishops in 1920 believed that the visible unity of the Church would involve the ‘wholehearted acceptance’ of:

‘The Holy Scriptures... as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith’;

The ‘Nicene’ Creed, ‘as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith and either it or the Apostles Creed as the Baptismal confession of belief’;

‘The divinely instituted sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion’;

‘A ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.’

In the context of the Covenant, we should note that the Appeal went on to suggest that episcopacy was the only available means of providing a ministry that could be acknowledged by the universal Church. The bishops immediately added that they did not question for a moment the spiritual reality of the ministries of Communion that were not episcopally ordered. ‘On the contrary, we thankfully acknowledge that these ministries have been manifestly blessed and owned by the Holy Spirit as effective means of grace.’ But the Appeal suggested that

episcopacy would prove ‘the best instrument for maintaining the unity and continuity of the Church’.<sup>5</sup>

The Free Churches responded to the Appeal in 1921 and conversations took place at Lambeth Palace (Dr Scott Lidgett leading for the Methodists and Archbishop Lang for the Anglicans) in two phases until 1938, when *Outline of a Reunion Scheme* was published. It was an attempt to sketch ‘the kind of Church in which the Churches ... might find themselves united without loss of what is specially valuable in their distinctive traditions’. It envisaged an organically united Church in England, which would be episcopal from the start and would eventually have a fully united ministry on the basis of episcopal ordination. The Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches issued a cautious response in 1941 and then matters lapsed during the War until Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher, in a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge on 3 November 1946, suggested a different approach. Instead of an ambitious constitutional scheme for multilateral reunion, the Archbishop suggested that the Free Churches ‘take episcopacy into their system’ and ‘try it out on their own ground’, in the hope that the churches might come together in the future on the basis of a common order. It was subsequently agreed that the discussion would be taken forward between the Church of England and various Free Churches directly, with the Federal Council having a facilitating and monitoring role.<sup>6</sup> This was the background to the vision of unity that informed the Anglican – Methodist conversations of the 1950s and 1960s, which narrowly failed to achieve the required majority in the Church Assembly and subsequently in the General Synod. The bitterness and disillusionment, particularly on the part of Methodists, induced by this failure, should not be underestimated; it is still a significant factor in our relationship.

The Lambeth Appeal was an early example of the aspiration to work for visible unity that found many expressions over the next few decades. The

---

5 The passage continued: ‘But we greatly desire that the office of a Bishop should be everywhere exercised in a representative and constitutional manner, and more truly express all that ought to be involved for the life of the Christian Family in the title of Father-in-God.’ The 1888 version of the Quadrilateral simply referred to ‘the historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of his Church.’

6 *Church Relations in England: Being the Report of Conversations between Representatives of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Representatives of the Evangelical Free Churches in England* (London:SPCK, 1950). G.K.A. Bell, *Christian Unity: The Anglican Position* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), ch. V.

first world conference on Life and Work was held in Stockholm in 1925 and the first world conference on Faith and Order took place at Lausanne in 1927. The United, Primitive and Wesleyan Methodist Churches came together in 1932 to form the Methodist Church of Great Britain. In the years leading up to the Second World War, Faith and Order and Life and Work converged in the planning of the World Council of Churches, which finally came into being in 1948.

The third world conference on Faith and Order in 1952 enunciated the famous Lund principle: that churches should work together in everything, except where differences of conviction compelled them to act separately. Although it is a principle that has been honoured more in the breach than the observance, it states a practical vision of unity in mission that remains valid.

Shortly before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) committed the Roman Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement, the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, meeting in New Delhi in 1961, articulated a vision of unity that has not been superseded or surpassed:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to the Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.<sup>7</sup>

The Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991 also enumerated the marks of full visible unity (what it called 'full communion'): 'the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation'. The statement went on to say that 'the goal of the search for full communion is realized when

---

7 Report of the Section on Unity, Third Assembly of the WCC, New Delhi, 1961: Kinnamon and Cope, eds, p. 88.

all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness'. It specified that 'this full communion will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action', through councils and synods at various levels.<sup>8</sup>

The Canberra statement immediately addressed the question of diversity within communion, stating that 'diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion.' Canberra went on to point out that there must be limits to diversity: 'Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever' (cf. Hebrews 13.8) and when it impedes the Church's confession of salvation that embraces the whole of humanity according to Scripture and the apostolic preaching. The statement believed that, within these limits, diversity was a positive good: 'In communion diversities are brought together in harmony as gifts of the Holy Spirit, contributing to the richness and fullness of the church of God.'<sup>9</sup>

### **'Full visible unity'**

The preliminary informal conversations (which reported in *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, 1996) clearly established that both our churches shared the common conviction of the ecumenical movement (described above) that the Body of Christ should be visibly one and that the 'full visible unity' of Christ's Church was a gift of God's grace and the goal towards which we, as Methodists and Anglicans, should be contributing.

Against this wider ecumenical context, the Common Statement *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* explored the position of our churches in relation to four commonly recognised dimensions that, when held together in all their richness, make up the full visible unity of the Church of Christ (AMC, 101ff).

- \* 'a common profession of the apostolic faith, grounded in Holy Scripture and set forth in the historic creeds'
- \* 'the sharing of one baptism and the celebrating of one Eucharist'
- \* 'a common ministry of word and sacrament'
- \* 'a common ministry of oversight'

Where these four elements become present, we have, in a particular

---

8 Kinnamon and Cope, eds, p. 124 (2.1).

9 Ibid., p. 125 (2.2).

situation, the essential components of the full visible unity of the Christian Church. This is clearly not a prescription for a rigidly institutional form of unity. There is no blueprint for full visible unity, but a portrait can be sketched. In that portrait, these elements must be present. The fabric or texture of the communion that is experienced in the Church's life will show that it is visibly and manifestly one in the sight of the world, even though it will remain diverse in its cultural expressions of worship, belief and practice.

The Formal Conversations showed that our churches were sufficiently agreed on the goal of the full visible unity of the one Church to make a Covenant, on the basis of which we would work together on the remaining obstacles.

We may note several features of the way that these four elements are portrayed in the Faith and Order tradition and in the Common Statement:

First, these elements are all visible, manifested in time and space. The WCC Faith and Order statement *The Nature and Mission of the Church* says: 'Working for the unity of the Church means working for fuller visible embodiment of the oneness that belongs to its nature' (53).<sup>10</sup> It is true that the deepest sources of our unity surpass our human understanding: they are personal and relational and reside in the spirit and in the heart. But it is equally true that they need to become manifest, to be incarnated, so to speak, in the material world. Jesus' high priestly prayer is for a unity that is visible to the world (John 17.21). The hidden work of the Holy Spirit that binds Christians together is not more 'spiritual' than the tangible ministry of the word, the sacraments and pastoral care, which we are called to hold in common: these are the Spirit's means of grace and the primary expressions of our unity.

Second, the marks of full visible unity do not imply any particular organisational structure. While this unity will inevitably have some kind of institutional expression, as every communal human activity does, no single institutional model is assumed. Through its long history the Church has developed various forms of conciliar life for the purposes of consultation, discernment and decision-making – which are all involved in oversight – and these are what we should be addressing as our two churches draw closer together.

---

10 Geneva: WCC, 2005.

Third, the vision of the full visible unity of Christ's Church makes a rich diversity possible. It does not carry any connotations of uniformity of worship or practice – in fact, as we saw in the Lambeth Appeal and in the Canberra Statement, quite the reverse. Each tradition of the Christian Church has developed its own way of confessing the faith (in creeds, formularies, catechisms and hymns) and its particular patterns of ministry and organisation as it has travelled through history. Cultural factors play their part and at best should be seen as adaptations for the sake of mission.<sup>11</sup> These distinctive features help to make up the identity of a Christian community. They need to be respected and preserved, while also being enriched – and, if appropriate, challenged – from elsewhere. Legitimate diversity does not detract from unity, but enriches it. The opposite of unity is not diversity, but division. After all, both our churches are examples in themselves of communion in diversity.

Fourth, full visible unity can be attributed only to the whole Church, not to a particular part of it. As our second interim report *Living God's Covenant* pointed out (p. 4: 12), it is not appropriate to think of full visible unity being achieved bilaterally. What can be accomplished bilaterally is a significant step towards the ultimate goal, as we make our journey towards our God-given destination when the indestructible unity of the Body of Christ will be fully revealed. Two or more churches coming together seek to be 'in communion', as for example through the Porvoo Agreement of 1996 between the four British and Irish Anglican Churches and six Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches.<sup>12</sup> Churches already in covenant partnership, as we are, should seek the full visible communion of their churches. The term 'full visible communion' has been found helpful in recent Anglican–Roman Catholic relations.<sup>13</sup> It is a formula that allows space, respects the fact of difference and resists any suggestion of a 'take-over'. Similarly, the slogan 'united, not absorbed' has been a watchword

---

11 *Called to Love and Praise* 3.1.3-4.

12 *The Porvoo Common Statement, etc.* (London: Church House Publishing, 1992). North American Agreements, Called to Common Mission between The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Waterloo Declaration between the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, use the term 'full communion'.

13 E.g. The Mississauga Statement 2000 which led to the setting up of the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity and Mission, and the Common Declaration by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and Pope Benedict XVI in 2006.

in bilateral conversations since the Malines Conversations of the 1920s and sums up what we aim for in the Covenant.<sup>14</sup>

### **Enhancing unity**

The process that led to the Covenant followed the method of seeking unity by stages. The Covenant is a major staging post on a journey. The Common Statement and the two interim reports have used what we might call ‘incremental language’ about unity, unity by degrees. ‘Greater visible unity’ and ‘further and fuller forms of visible unity’ are expressions used in the Foreword to *An Anglican–Methodist Covenant* and the main text talks about ‘closer unity’ (120). *In the Spirit of the Covenant* refers to ‘a further phase of visible unity’ (1.1.2) and *Living God’s Covenant* talks about ‘making more visible and effective the unity that is already ours in Christ through faith and through our baptism into the Spirit-bearing Body’ (p. 4:12).

This incremental way of speaking about unity serves to emphasise the truth that visible unity can grow in depth and strength; it can be enhanced to an unlimited extent. But by the same token, visible unity can diminish, and disunity can become more conspicuous. There is no steady state, no standing still. We go forward or we go back. Unity language implies an imperative to work at it. As has been often said: unity is both gift and task.

### **‘Organic unity’**

While the Common Statement set the Anglican–Methodist relationship in the framework of the goal of the full visible unity of the one Church of Christ, and used incremental, step by step language about developing and enhancing unity, it also spoke of ‘organic unity’.

The phrase ‘organic unity’ makes even some ecumenically committed Christians nervous. For them it carries overtones of heavily institutionalised, monochrome unity. For such Christians, it threatens to flatten out diversity and to sap energy. ‘Organic unity’, for some, seems to hark back to the rather grandiose ideas of top-down denominational merger that were current in the 1960s, but do not seem either attractive or feasible now. That is not what the phrase ‘organic unity’ is intended to convey in the context of the Covenant.

---

14 ‘United, not absorbed’ was a theme of the informal Malines Conversations in Belgium between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, presided over by Cardinal Mercier, from 1921 to 1925.

The Common Statement (AMC) used ‘organic unity’ twice, once at the beginning and once at the end. In the very first paragraph it pointed out that stepping-stones were needed if organic unity was ever to be achieved (1) and in the Covenant Commitments the churches pledged ‘to work to overcome the remaining obstacles to the organic unity of our two churches, on the way to the full visible unity of Christ’s Church’ (194).

The phrase was used quite deliberately, to put down a marker about the serious, visible character of the unity that we are committed to pursue in the Covenant. ‘Organic’ has always had to do with life and process, with growth and development. Today ‘organic’ is a ‘golden’ word in everyday speech, standing for what is natural, wholesome, nourishing and generally healthy. It is opposed to what is artificial, contaminated and bad for your health. In the context of unity, ‘organic unity’ means a unity that is natural, not forced, and that is true to the traditions and identities of the parties concerned. Organic unity is a unity that has vitality because the partners each bring their strengths to it. It is not contrived, but flows from the deep spiritual unity that the Holy Spirit brings about when the Spirit incorporates us into the Body of Christ in baptism (1 Corinthians 12.13).

Organic unity is another way of speaking about the ‘full visible communion’ of two or more churches. To borrow the language of Lambeth 1920, it will involve ‘the wholehearted acceptance’ of the four dimensions of full visible unity, which will need to be expressed in specific ways in various contexts. The Covenant is premised on acceptance of these elements, set out in the Common Statement. We understand them as gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church and, in their outworking, open to development under the guidance of the Spirit. Together they shape and give substance to the mission of the Church.

- \* ‘a common profession of the apostolic faith, grounded in Holy Scripture and set forth in the historic creeds’
- \* ‘the sharing of one baptism and the celebrating of one Eucharist’
- \* ‘a common ministry of word and sacrament’
- \* ‘a common ministry of oversight’

For Methodists and Anglicans in a deepening Covenant, working towards organic unity means that they will continue to bring their Methodist and Anglican identities, traditions and experiences for mutual enrichment. In a relationship of organic unity – whatever that may look like in practice – it will still be true that what Methodists and Anglicans respectively treasure will not be lost. But it is equally true that both Anglicans and

Methodists will be challenged by what they learn and receive from each other. *Metanoia*, repentant rethinking, is a condition of organic unity. Organic unity ultimately means being one church with distinct traditions and communities within it that interact creatively. This is already our experience within the Methodist Church and the Church of England: why not in a larger whole?

### **Conclusions**

The JIC believes that the Covenant relationship must be allowed to unfold gradually – that is to say, organically, though with plenty of encouragement from the leadership of our two churches and from Methodists and Anglicans locally – so that our churches learn to work together and to think and decide together in every conceivable way (as the Lund principle proposed more than half a century ago), particularly in mission, until they act as one (LGC: 11).

The vision of full visible unity is much wider than a relationship between two churches, however precious. That deeper convergence in theology and practice will leave open the door for other churches to participate on the basis of shared theology and practice, if they wish to do so. The boundaries of visible unity must be extended as far as possible.

It is fair to say, however, that the institutional implications of the Covenant have not yet been discerned by either church, or by the JIC. This task of discernment will be on the agenda of the next phase of the JIC. Both churches are going through significant changes at the present time, with shifting perspectives and the emergence of fresh priorities. To some extent, though, we believe, not nearly enough, they are consulting and collaborating together through all this. In our chapter ‘How can decision-making be shared?’ we have tried to show a better way.

The energy for implementing the Covenant is mainly at local level and among senior church leaders. But we wonder whether the churches have either the energy or the will to adapt institutionally to each other in any significant way. Our report contains some recommendations about the practice of *episkope* and episcopacy in our two churches that will, we believe, significantly assist the coming together of the ministries of pastoral oversight and leadership in mission in our churches.

The JIC believes that, as churches, we should consistently act as one in every possible way, so that more and more areas of our church life and mission are shared and jointly carried out, until the moment eventually

comes when we face becoming one church in every respect and are ready to take that step – facing full visible communion.

Although the pace of progress towards full visible communion cannot be forced, deeper unity should not be pursued in a leisurely or casual manner. We began with the biblical imperative, grounded on our Lord's 'high-priestly prayer' in John 17, to make unity visible. We continued by setting out some of the strands in the ecumenical movement that articulated that vision of unity. Division is a denial of the Body of Christ and (as the international Methodist – Roman Catholic dialogue puts it) 'clouds our understanding of the Church'.<sup>15</sup> If there is an urgency attached to mission and evangelism, there is an equal urgency attached to seeking the unity in Christ that will help the world to believe in him. It is against this background that we bring forward the rest of what we have to say in this quinquennial report.

---

15 *The Grace Given You in Christ*, 46 (p. 22).