

## BRITISH METHODIST RESPONSE TO THE LIMA TEXT (1985)

### 1. Preamble

- 1.0 The British Methodist Conference of 1985, meeting in Birmingham, England, sends greetings to the Secretariat of the World Council of Churches in Geneva; we rejoice in the common life in Christ that we share with other member churches and we are happy to have this opportunity of joining together in theological affirmation. We believe that our faith in Christ, which is known to us in both individual and corporate experience, needs to be expressed in the clearest possible terms and we commit ourselves to full co-operation with other member churches to this end. We hope that, as we study together and listen to each other's comments, we shall be led to a deeper understanding of our common inheritance, a more complete sense of our unity in Christ, and a firmer grasp of the Gospel that we preach.
- 1.1 We are deeply grateful to the Faith and Order Commission of the W.C.C. for the initiative it has taken. Throughout the pages of **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** we find ourselves being urged to seek for further reconciliation with all those communions from whom we are formally divided. It is right that we should be so urged. While we have no wish to forget our history, and while we treasure much that is distinctive in our tradition, we are sure that structural division and divergence in doctrine, openly declared, often hinder our mission to the world. In the past we have profited from ecumenical conversation and been glad to share in Local Ecumenical Projects, but we have also known disappointment, and some of us are tempted, at the present time, to continue the ecumenical quest in a purely pragmatic way. There is an understandable hesitation about engaging in theological discussions with those in whose company we have sought but not found greater visible unity. The Faith and Order Commission has challenged us not to lose heart and shown us a way forward. We respond with gratitude.
- 1.2 We also pay tribute to the achievement of the Faith and Order Commission in producing **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry**. In little more than a hundred paragraphs we find ourselves confronted with the most pressing issues raised by three pivotal doctrines. We appreciate both the learning and the reconciling spirit that the work displays. The positive tone fills us with hope that the Christian communions are moving forward together, not yet in perfect order, but with the same goal in view. For this we are abundantly thankful. We are glad that doctrine, so often in the past a cause of dissension, is now proving to be a means by which we are drawn together. In giving us this text the Faith and Order Commission has set an example and issued a challenge. We willingly take up the challenge and hope to follow the example.

- 1.3 The approach adopted by the Faith and Order Commission is judicious and encouraging. The aim does not appear to be the creation of any contrived consensus. There is no attempt to ignore the present diversity. On the contrary, the strength of the text lies in the fact that it recognises diversity while at the same time looking for and revealing convergence. The text, therefore, gives room both for the preservation of traditional attitudes and convictions, and also for growth. This surely points the way in which ecumenical discussion must proceed in the immediate future. Convergence in doctrine must be recognised and welcomed and developed before questions of structural unity can properly be raised. We believe this approach is both realistic and hopeful and we congratulate the Faith and Order Commission on making it clear.
- 1.4 We are asked to give answers to four specific questions and we have tried to ensure that our answers passed three critical tests, all of them stated or implied in the text itself. In the first place, they must be the answers of the whole Methodist church in Britain and not of one group or committee within it. Certainly the Conference speaks for Methodism but, on this matter, the Conference could not speak until it knew the minds of the whole church. Consequently the Conference of 1983 asked the Synods, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils of Methodism to spend time discussing the text and to pass on their comments and conclusions to the Connexional Faith and Order Committee. A year was given over to this process and we can confidently say that every group that wished to be heard has been heard.
- 1.5 Secondly our answer must be given in the full knowledge of how other communions are moving towards their answer. It is no longer possible, if it was ever desirable, to put forward theological comments as if the way in which they would be heard and interpreted by others was of no consequence. Now, when other communions are engaged in the same discussions as we are engaged in ourselves, it would be perverse to attempt to operate in a denominational vacuum. It is not, therefore, enough for us to speak our mind; at least, not until our mind has been exposed to the minds of others, so that we become conscious not only of our speaking but of their hearing. We have urged ecumenical discussion of the text on our people and in the final stage we have held profitable meetings with representatives of the Church of England, the Baptist Union and the United Reformed Church.
- 1.6 Thirdly our answers must follow the lead of the text and be positive. We rejoice in the convergence to which the text alludes and we wish to encourage it in every way we can. On many occasions in the past the Methodist Church has declared itself to be firmly committed to the search for visible unity. We stand now where we always stood. Our answers must be honest and faithful, and frank, if need be, but they must be eirenical. We hope and believe that even the greatest difficulties discussed in this response will be seen as part of our quest for a deeper unity in Christ. If we struggle now, it is in order that, in God's own day, we may be one.

## 2. **The Four Questions**

- 2.0 We come now to the four questions. It must be said that, had we been asked to comment on the text in general, our response would not have followed the path of these four questions. When the matter was discussed in our various

councils, it proved difficult to keep to this agenda, and many of the comments we have received followed their own logic and gave no direct answers to the questions. Nevertheless answers must be given. We shall, however, be most true to the Methodist Church as a whole if our answers to the questions are fairly brief and if we then continue at greater length with comments and issues raised by the undertaking as a whole.

2.1 **The extent to which your church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church through the ages**

2.1.0 We have difficulty with this question because it is not clear what is meant by the phrase 'the faith of the Church through the ages'. There are great difficulties if the phrase is to be understood **descriptively**. If that be how it is to be interpreted we are being asked if the text expresses what has in fact been believed by Christians down the centuries. There is, however, great diversity within the Christian tradition. Many elements of this diversity complement one another, but many elements are also mutually incompatible. Furthermore, there are problems about apprehending in one intellectual and cultural milieu the thought of another. Thus, the linguistic formulation of one generation may not necessarily mean the same things to a later generation. Again, much twentieth-century Christian consensus represents a position that in former centuries would have been accepted by only a minority of Christians. If, therefore, the question be interpreted in this straight-forward descriptive sense, we can but reply that the text represents only certain aspects of the Church's faith of baptism, eucharist and ministry as embraced down the ages.

2.1.1 Perhaps, however, the phrase is to be understood not descriptively but **prescriptively**. According to this interpretation we are being asked if we believe that the text expresses how what we judge to be the essential and enduring convictions of the historic faith are to be understood today. Any positive response to such a question must be qualified by the awareness that our lives are not free of error or sin, and that there is a proper humility that should attach to all theological formulation since our stated faith is not identical with the truth we imperfectly apprehend. There may be error in our understanding, categories and language. 'God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts'. On the other hand we are confident that the Holy Spirit gives us real insight and understanding. If the phrase 'faith through the ages' be understood prescriptively rather than descriptively our response to the question is basically positive.

2.1.2. We recognise the centrality of the doctrines of baptism and eucharist. They proclaim in word and sign the whole Gospel of creation and redemption. All that we affirm as Methodists regarding the need of our race for salvation, the all-sufficiency of Christ, and the fulness of salvation in this life and the life to come can be expressed in these two sacraments. We recognise that they are expounded in the text most carefully and we gladly agree that, in that exposition, we find the essential matter of the faith through the ages. We recognise also the great significance of the doctrine of the ministry. There is no Church without ministry. God must be served and the world must be served, so we cannot discuss the operation of the faith of the Church through the ages without giving due care to this subject. It would be idle to deny that the subject has been contentious or that it has involved the Methodist Church

in much painful debate, both internally and externally. Nevertheless, ministry is at the heart of the Gospel of reconciliation. Although our response is in general positive, we have serious reservations, and these are detailed later. However, we rejoice to testify that we are able to embrace as friends in Christ others with whom we continue to have differences. Our response to the first question, therefore, is that we recognise in the text a comprehensive account of how those grounded in the true faith have tried, in their several ways, to give common expression to the faith that is in them. We see in the fact of doctrinal convergence a sign that the Spirit is leading the churches to a position in which they can at last express formally what has always been true in divine reality, that they are one in Christ.

- 2.2 **The consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognise the text as an expression of the apostolic faith.**
- 2.2.0 Clearly, the most obvious consequence is a greater awareness of the riches of Christian belief, a deeper understanding of the doctrines of other churches and, without doubt, a deeper understanding of our own. There is hope, too, that we can build on the baptismal unity that is already established. We hope to pursue this further, building on our experience in Local Ecumenical Projects where joint approaches to Christian initiation have made great strides. We are looking for signs of hope that the divergence between those who practise infant baptism and those who practise believers' baptism can be overcome.
- 2.2.1 In response to paragraphs 15-16 on baptism, and 51-55 on ministry, we gladly affirm our recognition of the baptisms, confirmations and ordained ministries of our sister churches within the fellowship of the World Council of Churches.
- 2.2.2 Beyond considerations such as these, we find this a difficult question to answer, at least until we have been able to study the responses of other churches. We do not yet know the extent to which other churches will recognise the text as an expression of the apostolic faith. Our highest hope is that all member churches of the WCC will give a positive answer to the first question and that, as a consequence, the text will become a basic document for all dialogue thereafter. Yet it has to be recognised that our own comments and qualifications, modest as we hope they will appear, may be met with other, and perhaps opposite, comments and qualifications, so that a common acceptance of the text as an agreed starting point may not be possible. Nevertheless the advantage of having before us this ecumenically achieved rehearsal of these critical subjects cannot be over-estimated. It may be necessary for us to settle for a more limited hope, that the exercise in which we are now engaged will reveal to us how much we have in common and how easy it is to lose our sense of proportion regarding our differences. If we can become aware of how much in **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** we all agree with, it may be possible to approach our disagreements in better heart.
- 2.3 **The Guidance your church can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual life and witness**

- 2.3.0 We are grateful to have received this text. We are glad to have had the opportunity to discuss it at every level of our church life. Because the opportunity was also a duty many have turned their attention to the issues of baptism, eucharist and ministry who would not otherwise have done so. No study of sacramental theology can fail to enhance worship. No study of ministry can fail to strengthen the calling of the church both in its service of God and in its service of the world. It would be hard to compile a list of all the gains from a careful study of this text, but that is not what we are asked to do. We are asked to consider the guidance our church can take from it. There are two matters referred to in the section on baptism, which are already the subject of reports called for by the Conference. They are the admission of baptised children to holy communion and the question whether the practice of delaying baptism until maturity, for conscientious reasons, might be given an acknowledged place in our practice of Christian initiation. Both involve serious theological issues and, to some extent, they point in opposite directions. Nevertheless both are under active consideration in British Methodism at this moment.
- 2.3.1 For many years there has been among us an increasing concern for the eucharist as the expression of Christian worship in its fulness. The publication of **The Methodist Service Book** in 1975 both epitomised and stimulated that concern. The section of the text on the eucharist will, therefore, be read in Methodism with far more interest and understanding than would have been possible a decade ago. The description of the eucharist as **anamnesis**, memorial, which has already proved a major point of reconciliation among Christians, is particularly congenial to our tradition, both of theology and hymnody. It must be said that the mystery of Christ's presence in the eucharist, though real to our experience, has not been much discussed in Methodism outside academic circles. We are sure that the time has come for a wider study of this issue and of eucharistic practice generally. This cannot but have a positive influence upon all our other services of worship. It must be remembered that, due to both the tradition and the present structure of Methodism, most of our services do not and cannot include holy communion. For the guidance of our church, therefore, in its worship, educational and spiritual life, this section of the text is most timely.
- 2.3.2 The section on the ministry may well be less successful in providing us with positive guidance, for discussion of the nature of the Church's ministry has been with us ever since Methodist Union in 1932. Our Deed of Union has much to say about the ordained ministry. The Conversations with the Church of England showed great concern for the same topic.

Similar discussions took place in relation to Covenanting for Union, and we encounter the same issues in Sponsoring Bodies and Local Ecumenical Projects all over the country. That is not to say that we have nothing to learn. It is doubtful whether the personal, collegial and communal aspects of ministry are fully understood in Methodism and, despite our convictions about the ministry of the whole people of God, we have been all too ready to identify the Church's ministry with the ordained ministry. As far as the mutual recognition of ordained ministers is concerned, we have listened to the testimony of churches that are episcopally ordered, we have judged that the acceptance of episcopacy would be no contradiction of our doctrines, and

we await the occasion when it would be appropriate 'to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'.

2.4. **The suggestions your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today"**

2.4.0 We make four suggestions, all of them related to the section on ministry. First, we believe that future discussion of ministry must be given much greater prominence to the vocation of the whole people of God. The need for an ordained ministry would never be denied in Methodism. Ministry in this sense is essential to the being of the Church, but we believe that throughout the Church of Christ there has been a serious loss of proportion. So much ecumenical discussion has been concerned with the validity of orders that the impression has been given that the doctrine of the Church is centred in the doctrine of the ordained ministry. We believe that this is a distortion of the truth and, as a distortion, can only confuse the understanding of the Church and its ministry. Moreover, in practice in many churches, the ordained ministry has come to take responsibilities and perform functions that are not proper to it; the people, the **laos** of God, have been inclined passively to acquiesce and even to forget that, as the people of God, they have been called to minister themselves. We believe that an expression of the apostolic faith today must concentrate on the calling of the whole people of God, must include a charge to the people to be what they are, and, if necessary, a charge to the ordained to enable this to be so.

2.4.1 Secondly, when the ordained ministry is under discussion, we believe that the question of the ordination of women cannot be avoided. We understand how deeply held are the convictions of some who oppose the ordination of women, but we should not be true to our belief or our experience if we did not bear our witness to the opposite point of view. We are asked to address ourselves to 'the Apostolic Faith Today' and it is proper for us to consider the force of the word 'today' in that phrase. How does the apostolic faith today differ from the apostolic faith in other generations? One answer is that our generation has seen profound changes in social organisation in almost every society in the world. The church is challenged by such changes, not necessarily to approve them, but to discover what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through social change, and to interpret the Gospel so as to meet the new situation. We do not believe that the vocation of women to the ordained ministry is simply the result of social change. The image of God in Gen. 1:27 is applied to both male and female, and the flesh that our Lord took is a flesh that is shared by both male and female. A profound differentiation between the sexes at this point and the consequent exclusion of one of the sexes from the ordained ministry cannot, in our view, be accepted. The fact that we are now able to recognise the implications of these biblical affirmations may be a consequence of social change, but the affirmations themselves are not. After decades of hesitation, we in Methodism have come to accept the vocation of women to the ordained ministry. Today we believe in the principle more firmly than ever before. We believe that any project concerned with 'the Apostolic Faith Today' must come to terms with this reality.

- 2.4.2 Thirdly, we are aware of the difficulties that all churches have encountered in their attempts to establish a satisfactory model of the diaconate. We believe in the serving Church and we believe that the Christian Church does in fact offer service to God and to the world. We are not alone in confessing that we have not been able to create and preserve a model of a vigorous diaconate, open to both sexes and not directed to the presbyterate (although the Wesley Deaconess Order comes very close to it). On the other hand we take very seriously the concern that a separate diaconate might lead to a devaluation of the ministry of the laity, and cannot accept that a separate diaconate is necessarily appropriate in every situation in the church. However, we wish to approach this issue with sympathy and receptivity and pledge ourselves to a continual exploration of it. In this the Faith and Order Commission may well be able to help us all.
- 2.4.3 Fourthly, we cannot forget that, as we meet to discuss the faith of the Church, millions are starving, millions are suffering oppression, and rich nations with a Christian heritage are more concerned to acquire nuclear missiles than to relieve distress. We all live under the threat of disaster. Some of us fear the apocalypse tomorrow, others experience the apocalypse now. 'The Apostolic Faith **Today**' must speak to this situation. World hunger, political oppression, and nuclear wars are not theological terms, but a faith which does not address them is no faith at all. We do not suppose that the Faith and Order Commission needs to be informed on this matter. The Methodist Church, as much in penitence as in anger, simply adds its voice to those who are calling for the total world-wide commitment of all who hold the apostolic faith to the causes of justice, righteousness and peace.

### 3. **General Comments**

- 3.0 The doctrinal standards of the British Methodist Church are not set out, as are those of some other churches, in a finite and comprehensive statement. The Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union refer to 'the Apostolic Faith', 'the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation', and 'the Evangelical Faith'. The doctrines of this faith are held to be 'based upon the Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures'. They are to be found in 'Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons'. These authorities do not impose 'a system of formal or speculative theology' but they do ensure 'loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel'. It is against this background that the response of the Methodist Church must be understood. The doctrinal identity of Methodism is guaranteed by common respect for these standards, by the use of a common hymn book, a common service book and common patterns of worship, by a connexional system that ensures remarkable consistency of usage in Methodism, and by loyalty to the interpretations of the doctrinal standards given by the Conference from time to time.
- 3.1 We experienced two difficulties in discussion which showed themselves at every level, though they were not always clearly articulated. In the first place, it had to be decided among us what was the precise setting in the life of the church in which the text belonged. Because of Methodist tradition, we are held together by a common life of worship, fellowship, and service, rather than by subscription to a series of articles. Consequently, when we speak of confessing the faith, we think primarily of a community addressing

God in worship or a preacher proclaiming the Gospel to the world. We believe that something similar is true of other churches. The present text requires of us systematic intellectual discussion but not an immediate response either in terms of worship or practical action. The result has been that, in many places, the discussion was left to groups with proven theological and theoretical expertise. This is in marked contrast to the discussion of documents connected with the Conversations with the Church of England and with Covenanting. In both those cases significant practical consequences were involved and Methodists felt themselves to be existentially engaged. In the case of the present text the significance of the convergence clearly documented in it has not been fully appreciated and the undertaking has been seen as largely theoretical. We make this as a statement of fact based on the evidence of this enquiry. The Methodist Church as a whole does not undervalue the cause of doctrinal accuracy, still less the pursuit of doctrinal convergence. We hope, in due time, to appropriate much of the text into our doctrinal tradition so that it becomes not simply a series of propositions to discuss, but an affirmation of our Christian commitment and understanding. Nevertheless the present hesitation must be recorded. It may imply a judgement on Methodism, but perhaps it also indicates that the movement of the people of God cannot always be controlled, in terms of either stimulation or restriction, by those responsible for doctrinal definition.

- 3.2 The second difficulty concerns the theological method adopted in the text. Nowhere is this defined, and it is not clear what authority the text wishes to accord, say, to reason or tradition. Neither is it clear what approach to the authority and use of scripture is being adopted. The authority of the New Testament over our church life today may be accepted in principle, but what kind of authority this is, how it is to be applied, and how it is to be related to our understanding of the continued work of the Holy Spirit, are questions that need to be addressed. For example, given that baptismal practice and theology took certain forms in New Testament times, it has still to be asked how this fact is to be honoured in a society and church which differ so much from that of the New Testament period. The lack of clarity over methodology may be instanced by noting that each of the three doctrines under discussion attracts to itself a whole cluster of biblical images. Each image is by itself illuminating, but a question arises as to whether all these images can be united into a coherent whole, and, if so, how. It is well to discuss baptism in terms of 'the sign of new life', 'participation in Christ's death and resurrection', 'the gift of the Spirit', etc., but it is not clear how these ideas relate to one another, neither is it clear what authority these biblical images have for theological formulation today. We have no doubt that the method employed in this text falls within the broad agreement regarding scripture and tradition reached by the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963. Nevertheless, we were not always able fully to appreciate the way in which the argument was constructed.
- 3.3 Finally, we believe the report could have been bettered if greater attention had been given to the cultural context of both theology and ecclesiastical structures. This cultural context may manifest itself in at least two ways. First, theological positions which commend themselves – or even appear axiomatic – to minds formed in one cultural milieu may nonetheless appear as problematic to minds formed in another. We do not draw the conclusion

that we cannot therefore speak of truth *per se* as opposed merely to what is true for a particular cultural perspective. We do, however, draw the conclusion that there is a proper humility, caution and openness that should attend our theological formulations. We believe that an awareness of the possible cultural relativity of our theology should encourage this. Secondly, and just as important, different aspects of the faith may be existentially central to people living in different cultural settings. For example, Christians living in poverty and under oppression may find it proper to highlight certain aspects of the eucharist, whilst those living in a European suburb may find it proper to highlight others. Similarly, one pattern of ordained ministry may be appropriate in one society, but less so in another. These factors may be recognised without at the same time countenancing partisanship, and whilst also encouraging a broad vision and a willingness to listen to every voice in the church. Indeed, we rejoice in the breadth of vision and depth of experience that is available to us within the multi-cultural context of the world church. At the same time we would not wish to underwrite any suggestion that a final and complete statement of one faith is possible or even desirable within the cultural diversity of the modern world. These are immensely complicated questions, and we simply raise them here. We do, however, believe the report should have given them more attention, and recommend that the Faith and Order Commission seek to rectify this in its future work.

#### **4. Specific Comments**

4.0 The discussion of the text will no doubt give rise to a very large number of queries in all the churches where it takes place. It has been so in Methodism. Interesting as all these queries are, it is impractical to include them all in a response of this kind. It seems better to select some issues as samples or tokens of the very detailed discussions that have taken place. The following paragraphs are included because they relate to matters that either were much commented on in Methodism or are particularly important from a Methodist point of view.

##### **4.1 Baptism**

4.1.0 The observance of baptism in Methodism, as in other churches, has been beset by at least three dangers. One is the danger that it might be reduced to a social custom. A second is that it might become a private service fixed at a time to suit the family without the participation of a Christian congregation. A third is that it might give rise to confusions and misconceptions due to the obliqueness of its symbolism and the failure of our preachers and teachers regularly to expound the rite. The Methodist Church has been conscious of these dangers and much progress has been made at least with regard to the first two points. By far the most common practice among us now is for baptism to take place within the normal Sunday worship in the presence of the whole congregation and only after careful preparation. There is more preaching and teaching on the sacraments now than there has ever been and it is hoped that discussion of the present text will provide a further stimulus.

4.1.1 There was some difficulty about how the word 'baptism' was being used in the text. At one point it appeared to be a purely descriptive term for a particular ritual action apart from any specific theological meaning (e.g. 17).

At another point the term is used as having essential theological sense, 'incorporation into Christ', 'washing away of sin', 'new birth', etc., (e.g. 1,2). There is a certain ambiguity here. For example, is it being said that the rite 'effects' these things, or simply that it 'signifies' them as being important elements in the Christian life into which the baptised person is initiated? Methodists do not wish to deny efficacy in the sacraments. However, they plead that the nature of this efficacy be clarified, believing that there are some interpretations of the notion which they must reject. Methodists would want to emphasise that the efficacy of the sacraments depends upon God and not upon any supposed automatism in the rite. We have much to gain from the sacramental understanding of sister churches, but it will be easier for us if we proceed slowly without the fear that certain interpretations are taken for granted.

- 4.1.2 A particular example of this difficulty is found in paragraph 3 where it is said, 'By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ and where the power of sin is broken.' These are stirring images and they can well be understood with regard to Christian life as a whole. But if we are to relate them to the baptismal moment, particularly the infant baptismal moment, difficulties at once arise. Careful consideration of the biblical understanding of signs leads us out of the difficulty, but there is an obvious danger that some will simply read off these phrases in terms of a mechanical process and the result will be not merely divergence but polarisation.
- 4.1.3 To speak more positively, we deeply appreciate the stress on corporateness in the discussion of baptism. In the Gospels, baptism is associated with the river Jordan. The image suggests crossing the boundary, and so links with Paul's baptismal image of moving from the lordship of sin to the lordship of Christ, from one social identity to another. If that were taken as the reality of baptism, it would be considerably different from the individualistic thought of the washing away of sin. We are among those who have suffered from too great a stress on the individual to the detriment of our doctrine of the Body of Christ. It is good, therefore, to be reminded that baptism is the seal of our common discipleship, that the baptised are buried with Christ and raised here and now to a new life in the power of his resurrection, and that we are thus brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism is thus a springboard for unity (para. 6). The corporate emphasis in baptism signifies not only admission to the Body of Christ, which is protection and salvation, but also commission in the Body of Christ, which is exposure and witness. Perhaps, following this line of thought, more could be made of baptism as a witness to the world, a witness of God's prevenient love, a witness of his forgiving grace, a witness of new life, and a witness of unity.
- 4.1.4 Much attention was given to para. 12 and its commentary. Methodism has never varied in commending infant baptism to its members. The sentence, 'A solemn obligation rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism', tends to recur in our documents. Consequently, many of us, reading Section IV A on 'Baptism of Believers and Infants', take the view that the argument there in favour of infant baptism is muted. We would like to hear more about baptism as the sign of grace that is prior to response, about baptism as the sign of admission to the covenant people, about the

unsought givenness of life itself, of name, home, family and religious context, about the place of children in the body of Christ. It is proper that the theology of believers' baptism, that is to say, of that method of initiation which limits baptism to those who are themselves able to confess the faith should be treated with due care, but perhaps the balance has swung too far in that direction. At the same time we recognise that there is growing interest in believers' baptism in many churches, including Methodism at present, so much so that the Conference is even now considering whether it is possible for the Methodist Church to embrace both patterns of initiation. The matter is fraught with danger. Doctrine cannot easily be refashioned nor tradition easily diverted, and it is open to doubt whether our tight and homogeneous connexion could contain what might amount to two different, and perhaps competing, ecclesiologies. We are aware that the United Reformed Church has, under very different circumstances, been able to unite both traditions. We shall observe this example with the closest attention.

4.1.5 We agree with the firm statement in para. 13 that baptism is unrepeatable, and we wish that a reason were given for the statement. If Christians were told why baptism is unrepeatable they might be happier, since the reason must be linked with what we think baptism does. Nevertheless we are aware of a number of Christian people of all age groups who have been through an experience of profound renewal and who long to express that experience in what they conceive to be the appropriate way, that is, by total immersion. Many of them would want to describe that immersion as baptism, regardless of whether they had been baptised as infants and subsequently confirmed. There are indeed dangers that such a practice might be divisive, that it might encourage elitism, and that it might disturb those with a confident faith in the significance of infant baptism. In pastoral conversation these dangers should be pointed out, and those concerned should be encouraged to find expression for their experience in other means of grace – for example: the Holy Communion or the Covenant Service. It is important that the profound experience be accompanied by an appropriately dramatic celebration.

## 4.2 Eucharist

4.2.0 Methodism, like most other churches and perhaps more than some, has made great gains in both experience and understanding of the holy communion in the last two or three decades. Liturgical reform has provided the most striking example of convergence between the churches, and Methodism has been glad to be involved in it. The publication of *The Methodist Service Book* in 1975, replacing *The Book of Offices* of 1936, was for many of our congregations a turning-point. Holy Communion is now more frequent in Methodist churches than it has ever been and in many places the full order of holy communion is now established as a regular monthly service. Much of the text on the eucharist can now be read by Methodists with an enthusiasm that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Even the term 'eucharist', for so long regarded with suspicion among us, is slowly coming to be accepted as an accurate and universal term rather than a sectarian one. The note of thanksgiving sounded in almost all modern liturgies has influenced all our other services. The sermon, for so long the climax of our normal worship, is now commonly moved into the centre of the service so that, after God's Word has been proclaimed, there is an opportunity for the people to respond with prayer, with confession of faith, with self-offering,

and above all with thanksgiving. The idea of a eucharistic pattern in all worship is now gaining ground, although only a fraction of our services are eucharists. We believe it very important to note that many of the elements listed in para. 27 do in fact occur in services that are not formally eucharists.

- 4.2.1 The very richness of meaning in this sacrament makes it easy for different people to stress different aspects and it should be added that there are some in Methodism who are resistant to the idea that this service should be understood primarily in terms of eucharist. For some it is the Lord's Supper, a memorial of Christ's death and a solemn personal communion between believers and their Lord. Some argue that, if service-books are to be used at all, Cranmer's service, as it has come down to us in Methodist tradition, is much to be preferred to modern liturgies, and some affirm that the giving of the peace, especially if it involves people moving about, is an unwelcome distraction. While it is not to be expected that the text would be equally welcomed by all, perhaps a greater stress on the eucharist as a service of holy communion would have gone some way to satisfying those who make affirmations such as these.
- 4.2.2 The statement in para. 13 that Christ's mode of presence in the eucharist is unique raises problems for many Methodists. In what sense is it true, and in what sense has the whole Church, at least through the last four centuries, considered it to be true? It is unique in the sense that Jesus said (according to Paul and perhaps Luke) that when we do this in remembrance of him he is present in his body and his blood; but it is equally true that Jesus said (according to Matthew) that where two or three are gathered in his name he would be in the midst of them; and that, if his disciples taught the nations to observe what he had taught, he would be with his disciples until the end of the age. Christ's presence in the eucharist is unique in the sense that every means of grace is unique, but is it unique in the sense that it is superior to all others? Does a discussion which concerns modes of the divine presence allow us to use 'unique' in a comparative sense? Methodism, in common with those churches that look to the Reformation for inspiration, has always prized preaching as a vehicle for the divine Word. Through the Holy Spirit Christ is present to the congregation in the word of the preacher. Few of us would want to compare different activities of the Spirit and suggest that one is more significant than another. We do not, of course, deny that in some churches the eucharist holds a unique and central place. In other churches preaching is central. This does not mean that in these latter churches the eucharist is not valued. It is not so prominent, but it may nonetheless be profoundly significant, an inner holy of holies, rarely approached, rather than a public altar used day by day.
- 4.2.3 This leads directly to a comment on paras. 30 and 31 where it is said that the eucharist should be celebrated frequently, at least every Sunday. These paragraphs do not take into account those traditions of the church, which, whilst having the highest regard for the eucharist, do not practise a weekly communion. John Wesley was firm in his belief in regular and frequent communion, and in recent years Methodism, profiting from its participation in the Ecumenical Movement and the Liturgical Movement, has moved nearer to its founder in this matter. Nevertheless, there are practical difficulties. As we have already indicated, the history and the structure of Methodism make weekly celebrations in all our churches all but impossible.

The Methodist Church began as a preaching mission within the Church of England. The parish churches provided the eucharist, the Methodist preachers provided the preaching and teaching. The pattern by which the Methodist preachers worked was retained after the separation; Methodist societies sprang up all over the country, but, although they were organised into circuits, provision for the eucharist was not easily made. Still today one Methodist minister serves several churches. Fewer than one in four of our services are led by an ordained minister. It follows that the normal Methodist service, taking normal in a purely statistical sense, cannot be a eucharist. Provision is made by the Conference for congregations that suffer consequent deprivation by authorising individual lay persons to preside at holy communion in particular places. The Conference has always resisted attempts substantially to extend the list of authorised persons, and a very considerable extension would be necessary to make weekly communion possible. We find it hard, therefore, to accept the thrust of paras. 30 and 31. We would reiterate that a eucharist less frequently celebrated is not necessarily a eucharist less highly valued.

4.2.4 It must also be recognised that, because the Methodist tradition has always meant frequent preaching services without communion, Methodists have learnt to nourish themselves on that kind of worship and many would not now wish to see the balance altered in favour of more frequent communion. They would argue that it is not now a matter of administrative necessity, but rather that the infrequency of celebration actually heightens the sense of the eucharist's importance. On the other hand, there are many Methodists who have learned increasingly to value more frequent celebrations of the eucharist. No suggestion is made by any of us that those who celebrate weekly eucharists should change their practice, but, by the same token, we believe paras. 30 and 31 are stated too strongly. The report falls short in that it contains no discussion of the relationship between the eucharist and other forms of worship, such as the preaching service, where the eucharistic shape is present, but the holy communion is not. Such a discussion could also deal with the important relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Ministry of the Word. It is even possible to infer from para. 2 that the Christian receives salvation only through the eucharist. Those who are inclined to make such an inference conclude, as might be expected, that, in the present text, preaching is undervalued. Furthermore, one cannot overlook the practice of the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends. The Methodist Church differs from both these bodies in important matters, not least with regard to the sacraments, but we would shrink from using the kind of language that serves to exclude them from the general tradition of Christian worship. While we appreciate the vigorous and positive approach of the text for ourselves and can applaud so much of the argument, we fear that it errs in being too exclusive.

### 4.3 **Ministry**

4.3.0 We have already said that one of our chief anxieties concerns the understanding of ministry and particularly the relation of the ministry of the ordained to the ministry of the whole people of God. The study of ministry can have a number of starting-points. One can begin with the need for a guarantor of true faith and worship, in which case matters of order are all-important and the discussion will centre on the ordained ministry and from

whence it derives its authority. Such discussion is likely to locate the idea of ministry primarily within the Church. Alternatively, one can begin with the calling of the whole people of God to mission in the world, in which case the ordained ministry exists as representative of the total ministry of the Church, and the idea of ministry is located on the frontier between the Church and the world. We recognise that the former approach enshrines an important principle. We recognise that the Church must be ordered, that it must be visible, that it must be clearly defined, that it must be secure in its rites and its doctrines. We recognise too that in practice we have not been very successful in structuring the Methodist Church for mission to the world. Nevertheless we believe that the second approach must be taken very seriously and we regret the shortcomings of the text at this point. We give our full support to the first six paragraphs, but we believe the proportions are wrong. In a document on ministry too much space is devoted to the ordained ministry. We recognise that the Faith and Order Commission deliberately set itself to discuss issues which divide the churches, and the ordained ministry has certainly been one such issue, but greater attention to the ministry of the whole people of God might have revealed a convergence that would have facilitated discussion of the vexed questions relating to ordination.

- 4.3.1 The need of a ministry within the church is accepted by all. What is said in paras. 11 and 12 is well said. The word must be preached, the sacraments duly administered and the faithful community must be cared for. In such tasks the ordained ministry plays a leading, indeed an essential, role. But not all ministry within the Church is the province of the ordained. Preaching, teaching and pastoral care are functions often carried out by the laity. When we turn to the ministry of the Church to the world, the significance of the lay role becomes even more impressive. We believe that this aspect of the Church's ministry and this function of the laity have not received in the text the treatment which they deserve.
- 4.3.2 We recognise in para. 17 an attempt to reconcile traditions in which the word 'priest' is used and prized with those in which it is treated with suspicion. The Deed of Union prevents us from conceiving of the ordained ministry as an exclusive order with a priestly (i.e. sacerdotal) character of its own. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the need of the Church for persons who are called and set apart for leadership in pastoral care, preaching and intercessory prayer, and for presidency at the sacraments. Given this, the debate about the use of the word 'priest' is really a very subtle one. It turns upon the question whether the ordained minister contributes to the eucharist in his/her own person some essential element other than the right to preside at it. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister, then the word 'priest' is not appropriate. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister and specifically activated by the minister's presence, the word 'priest' is appropriate. It would have been preferable if the interpretation given in the text to priestliness as consisting in self-offering obedience could have been applied to that particular priestly service also. As it stands, the text appears to allow a distinction of kind between the priestly service of the ordained ministry and the priestliness of the laity. We see ample evidence of convergence in this area, and we regret that a distinction remains. That distinction makes relationships between the churches more difficult.

- 4.3.3 As we have already said in para. 2.4.1, the Methodist Church accepts women into its ordained ministry on the same conditions as men and sees no reason to reconsider its position. We rejoice in the contribution that women are now making in the ordained ministry. We recognise the wisdom of what is said on this matter in para. 18 and we offer to the churches that are still undecided our witness that the destruction of this barrier has redounded to the glory of God.
- 4.3.4 So much has been said in ecumenical discourse about the three-fold ministry that we hesitate to say more (paras. 19-32). Our response at this point is, therefore, deliberately brief. It simply indicates our position for the sake of completeness, but does no more. On one hand the Methodist Conference has ruled that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate our doctrinal standards, and indeed has shown itself ready to embrace the three-fold ministry to advance the cause of visible unity. Such an acceptance would see the historic episcopate as a valuable sign of apostolicity, but not as a necessary sign, nor as a guarantee. Churches without the historic episcopate and the three-fold order of ministry, such as our own, have their own ways of seeking and guarding apostolicity, and of attending to the orderly transmission of ministry. Thus the ends imperfectly realised through the historic episcopate have been and are realised equally well by other structures, with the result that we see the historic episcopate as one possible form of church order, with considerations that commend it, perhaps particularly appropriate in some cultural settings, but neither normative nor clearly superior to any other. Thus, on the other hand, the Methodist Conference has never acknowledged that Methodism needs the three orders including the historic episcopate to make up any lack in its ordained ministry. We agree that the episcopal, presbyteral and diaconal functions need to be exercised in the Church, but the report offers no clear reason why these functions are best exercised through three (or for that matter two, four or seven) distinct orders of ordained ministry, and this criticism is reinforced by the lack of clarity with which these functions are defined, and the extent to which they overlap. Thus, the Conference has always maintained that the necessary functions listed in paras. 29-31 are, or could be, adequately discharged by the Methodist Church as at present constituted. Para. 37 of the text is not unsympathetic to this view. If, however, we are to consider the ordained ministry in the abstract, apart from any specific scheme for uniting particular churches, the Methodist Church would judge that the text shows too great a leaning towards the three-fold ministry (e.g. para. 22). Those churches with a three-fold ministry are exhorted to exploit its potential; those without it are asked to consider it as having 'a powerful claim to be accepted by them.' This imbalance is hard to justify unless there is an implication that, at this point, the churches with a single order are to some extent deprived. The text might reasonably have regarded the three-fold order as one possible structuring of the ordained ministry rather than as the normative one. The Methodist Church would be willing to accept the three-fold order, but not to allow that it is at present deprived.
- 4.3.5 Our next comment has already been anticipated in the previous paragraph. The allocation of different functions to each of the three orders of ministry in paras. 29-31 seems a little forced and difficult to square with the realities of church life. For example, the presbyter is placed within the local community, but many presbyters serve the church at regional or national

rather than at local level, and some exercise their ministry largely in secular employment. Again, the functions of the diaconate are not clearly defined, and insofar as they are clear, it is not easy to distinguish them from those of the laity. This is in fact recognised in the commentary in para. 31. Again, the episcopal function of representing unity and continuity in the Church, referred to in para. 29, is given to all the ordained in paras. 8 and 14. We wonder whether it is necessary to be so partial towards the three-fold order of ministry when the distinctions of function are none too clear, and when one of the orders is confessedly so poorly defined.

4.3.6 We acknowledge that a charge of partiality derives as much from the standpoint of the critic as from the actual content of the text. We welcome so much that is conciliatory to non-episcopal traditions, and have observed many instances of balanced judgement in the text. The orderly transmission of the ordained ministry, quite apart from a threefold order, is a powerful expression of the continuity of the church (para. 35). The succession of bishops is only one way in which apostolic tradition may be expressed (para. 36). Continuity in apostolic faith has been preserved in churches which have not retained the historic episcopate (para. 37). The episcopal succession is a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church (para. 38). Above all, there is the challenge to all churches to recognise that their structures, no matter how securely grounded in doctrine, are in constant need of reform. We accept this as applying to ourselves. God is calling us to a further ministry than we have yet known. Some of our shortcomings are known to us. Some need to be revealed. We enter into this discussion, not simply in order to bear a testimony, but to hear the testimony of others. Our hope is that the responses of sister churches to the text will help us to understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of our ministry as we have not done before.

4.3.7 As a church which does not have the office of bishop and which has not preserved ministerial succession within the historical episcopate (even though we have our own structures for the orderly transmission of ministry, and structures for the exercise of **episcopè**) we warmly appreciate the eirenic and conciliatory tone of paragraphs 35-8. In view of this we are bound to express disappointment at the caution and ambiguity of paragraph 53a. Here churches that have preserved episcopal succession are asked to recognise simply the 'apostolic content' of ordained ministries such as our own. This does not necessarily demand the interpretation that such churches are being asked to accept non-episcopal ministries as having parity with their own, even though this interpretation might be strongly implied by many statements earlier in the text. There are, for example, those who would gladly recognise the 'apostolic content' of, say, the ministry of the word exercised by the Methodist ministry, but who would at the same time contest the 'validity' of our orders.

## 5. **Conclusion**

5.0 It cannot be denied that, despite our clearly expressed gratitude to the Faith and Order Commission and support for the W.C.C., our response has contained some serious reservations. These reservations must be put in the context of a long and painstaking search for theological unity in which we are glad to be involved and which we cannot take lightly. We ask the Faith

and Order Commission, when they consider our response, to take account of the following factors.

- 5.0.0 In the first place we believe the ecumenical cause can best be served at the present time by complete openness. We believe it is possible to fall into error by contriving doctrinal accommodations that do not accord with the will and conviction of the people we represent. If we are to avoid this error, it is inevitable that our response will from time to time sound critical or even express complete dissent. However unfortunate this may be, we believe the Commission would prefer a frank appraisal of Methodist reaction to one which is diplomatic but not entirely accurate.
- 5.0.1 Secondly, while the reservations have to be expressed, the joy of Methodist people at the process of doctrinal convergence may be expressed even more feelingly. Our gratitude is nonetheless real because we have found it necessary to raise difficulties. We believe that, in the past, we have proved ourselves willing, not only to take great pains in the cause of ecumenism, but also to be led into strange territory as far as ecclesiastical polity goes. If we hesitate now it is not as those who have no intention of going further. It is in order that we may proceed in full conviction of the rightness of the way.
- 5.0.2 Thirdly, the Commission chose to concentrate on three crucial but contentious areas. It might have been possible to produce a text on some other subjects where convergence was equally evident and divergence considerably less. The Commission chose the more daring way. Differences were, therefore, inevitable, but we have no doubt that the end of this exercise will prove that the faithful application of W.C.C. partners to those difficult doctrinal issues was both necessary and abundantly worthwhile.
- 5.0.3 Fourthly, while we rejoice in the doctrinal convergence that has taken place, we do not suppose that a uniform statement of the faith is in prospect, nor do we of necessity wish that it was. History has provided us with many different expressions of the common faith. They can all profit from one another – that indeed is the purpose of the present exercise – but they are unlikely ever to be comprehended in one single expression of the faith. Individual distinctiveness and group distinctiveness will continue to give rise to different theological languages. When God has made his creatures so diverse, could we wish it not to be so? There is a danger that the unity we seek may become too restrictive. Our hope at the present time, therefore, is that, as we grow to understand and trust one another more, we shall be able to share our experiences and, acknowledging our differences, continue in full fellowship together to glorify our common Lord by worship and service in the world.
- 5.0.4 Fifthly, we must remind ourselves that our time is not God's time. We have shared in reconciliations that our fathers and mothers prayed for but never saw. Similarly some of our goals will be achieved by another generation who will understand them better than we do. Our very mortality makes us impatient, and it is well to be impatient, as long as there are obstacles that devoted enthusiasm can remove, but it is not given to us to measure out history. With all our impatience we must commit the ecumenical quest to the Spirit working in his Church.

- 5.1 We are grateful that this whole conversation takes place in a context of mutual trust born of what is essentially a common faith. The faith is the gift of Christ our Lord. We have no unity but in him; but in him we can have no disunity. Our differences are **ours**. They cannot divide his church. Grace and peace to you all.

#### **RESOLUTION**

That the Conference adopt this report and direct that it be sent to the World Council of Churches as the response of the Methodist Church to **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry**.

*(Agenda 1985, pp.566-586)*