

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2003 REPORT

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: joint liaison group report

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England

1.1 The Conference of 2002 (Resolution 4/6) appointed the Methodist members of the joint liaison group:

- The Revd John D Walker (Co-Chair)
- * The Revd Peter G Sulston (Co-Secretary)
- The Revd Dr Jane V Craske (Faith and Order nominee)
- Mrs Susan Howdle (Law and Polity nominee)
- * Deacon Jane Middleton
- The Revd Dr Martin Wellings

1.2 The Council for Christian Unity appointed the following as Church of England members of the group:

- The Rt Revd Ian P M Cundy (Co-Chair)
- * The Revd Prebendary Dr Paul Avis (Co-Secretary)
- Mrs Elizabeth Fisher
- * The Revd Canon Bill Croft
- The Revd John G Cole

1.3 The United Reformed Church responded to an invitation to send a representative to the group:

- * The Revd Sheila Maxey

[indicates participants in the formal conversation and participants in the trilateral conversations involving also the United Reformed Church]*

2.1 The task given to the group was to receive responses and propose resolutions to the Conference of 2003 and the General Synod of the Church of England meeting in July 2003. Its mandate was implicitly widened by Resolution 9/3 of the 2002 Conference:

In the light of its specific invitation to the United Reformed Church (because of the informal conversations) . . . to study and comment on An Anglican-Methodist Covenant, the Conference directs those it has appointed to the joint liaison group . . . to consider the responses received concerning [Conversations on the Way to Unity, the Report of the trilateral conversations] and, in consultation with the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, to bring to the Conference of 2003 proposals for carrying forward the work summarised in paragraphs 73 and 74 of the Report.

2.2 The Methodist members of the Joint Liaison Group met on 20 February to work together to clarify the task they had been given. The joint group met on 25 March and 9 May.

3.1 Resolution 4/3 of the Conference directed each District Synod and Circuit Meeting and Y Gymanfa to vote on the following resolution:

"The (name) Synod / (name) Circuit Meeting / Y Gymanfa approves the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, consisting of a preamble and mutual affirmations and commitments, as set out in paragraph 194 of the Common Statement."

and to send the results of their voting and any associated comments to reach the Conference Office before 17 April 2003. The General Synod passed a similarly worded Motion inviting diocesan synods to vote on the same resolution by 31 May.

3.2 Appendices are attached to this report showing the voting figures from the Circuit Meetings, District Synods and Y Gymanfa (1). A separate table shows the voting figures from Diocesan Synods (1A). There is a further appendix that offers some analysis of the pattern of voting and the weight of comments received from District Synods and Circuit Meetings and refers to comments received from individuals, groups and churches (2).

3.3 In further resolutions (4/4 and 4/5) the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee and the Law and Polity Committee to comment on the proposed Covenant. It similarly invited comments from the Youth Conference, partner churches (Methodist, United and others), and appropriate bodies within Churches Together in England, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and the World Methodist Council. The General Synod passed similar Motions. A further appendix gives an analysis of responses received from partner churches and ecumenical instruments (3).

4.1 An interim report was prepared for the Methodist Council to check with the Council preliminary thinking about how to present the work of the joint liaison group to the Conference and the General Synod and to seek their comments and advice. A similar conversation took place in the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England.

4.2 The joint liaison group took the view that it wished, as far as possible, to present the same report to both the Conference and the General Synod and to offer Resolutions / Motions having substantially the same effect. It will be for the Conference to make its own judgement on the Memorials it has received. The comparable process in the Church of England is for a diocese to submit a "following motion" with

the report of its vote on the Covenant itself. The Business Committee of the Synod will decide how these are to be dealt with.

5.1 This year the focus of the debate in both governing bodies is on whether or not to enter into this Covenant. If the two governing bodies decide to enter into the proposed Covenant the joint liaison group senses from the responses it has received that the two churches would expect the formal entry into the Covenant to take place as soon as that event can be appropriately arranged. The group is aware that, although no firm arrangements have been made, possibilities regarding a date and a place have been explored and the intention would be to give notice of these as possibilities that could be quickly confirmed should both churches agree to enter into the Covenant.

5.2 Last year the Conference received the Common Statement, including the wording of the Covenant set out in paragraph 194. (The General Synod took note, a process having a similar effect.) The text of paragraph 194 is as follows:

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant

We, the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England, on the basis of our shared history, our full agreement in the apostolic faith, our shared theological understandings of the nature and mission of the Church and of its ministry and oversight, and our agreement on the goal of full visible unity, as set out in the previous sections of our Common Statement, hereby make the following Covenant in the form of interdependent Affirmations and Commitments. We do so both in a spirit of penitence for all that human sinfulness and narrowness of vision have contributed to our past divisions, believing that we have been impoverished through our separation and that our witness to the gospel has been weakened accordingly, and in a spirit of thanksgiving and joy for the convergence in faith and collaboration in mission that we have experienced in recent years.

AFFIRMATIONS

- 1. We affirm 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 of the whole people of God.**
- 2. We affirm 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.**
- 3. We affirm that both our churches confess in word and life the apostolic faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the ecumenical Creeds.**
- 4. We affirm that one another's ordained and lay ministries are given by God as instruments of God's grace, to build up the people of God in faith, hope and love, for the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care and to share in God's mission in the world.**
- 5. We affirm that one another's ordained ministries possess both the inward call of the Holy Spirit and Christ's commission given through the Church.**

6. We affirm that both our churches embody the conciliar, connexional nature of the Church and that communal, collegial and personal oversight (episkope) is exercised within them in various forms.

7. We affirm that there already exists a basis for agreement on the principles of episcopal oversight as a visible sign and instrument of the communion of the Church in time and space.

COMMITMENTS

1. We commit ourselves, as a priority, 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. In particular, we look forward to the time when the fuller visible unity of our churches makes possible a united, interchangeable ministry.

2. We commit ourselves to realise more deeply our common life and mission and to share the distinctive contributions of our traditions, taking steps to bring about closer collaboration in all areas of witness and service in our needy world.

3. We commit ourselves to continue to welcome each other's baptised members to participate in the fellowship, worship and mission of our churches.

4. We commit ourselves to encourage forms of eucharistic sharing, including eucharistic hospitality, in accordance with the rules of our respective churches.

5. We commit ourselves to listen to each other and to take account of each other's concerns, especially in areas that affect our relationship as churches.

6. We commit ourselves to continue to develop structures of joint or shared communal, collegial and personal oversight, including shared consultation and decision-making, on the way to a fully united ministry of oversight.

6.1 This report deals with a number of issues that have been raised in the process of study and response, particularly from the Methodist Church, and suggests a way of addressing other concerns and issues.

6.2 The relationship of the Covenant to the Common Statement as a whole. The Common Statement is the report of the formal conversations that took place and, as such, cannot be altered. It is possible, however, to offer some comments that seek to interpret or to give reassurance, clarification or elucidation of matters that have been raised concerning the wording of the Covenant itself and its relation to the previous sections of the Common Statement.

6.3.1 Commitment 1 of the Covenant speaks of “work to overcome the remaining obstacles to the organic unity of our churches, on the way to the full visible unity of Christ's Church.” The phrases ‘**organic unity**’ and ‘**full visible unity**’ are distinguished. Entry into the Covenant would be a step towards closer unity. It would be the sign of a deepening relationship between our two churches but would not

in itself bring about 'organic unity' nor would it prescribe a particular shape for future unity. It would make possible a growing common life of sharing together in worship, service and mission:

The visible unity we seek to live out together is a stage on the way to the full visible unity which we hope to realize with the whole Christian family. We see our journey as Anglicans and Methodists in England as part of a wider ecumenical endeavour to which we are committed. (from paragraph 14, Section II of Commitment to Mission and Unity, 1996)

6.3.2 Entry into a covenant would be but one step on the journey referred to and it would not be one taken regardless of our wider ecumenical relationships. That is why the critical solidarity of support expressed in the ecumenical responses (summarised in Appendix 3) is also so important.

6.4.1 What is meant by the phrase **shared theological understandings** in the preamble to the Affirmations and Commitments of the Covenant? These concern 'the nature and mission of the Church and of its ministry and oversight.' Throughout the section of the Common Statement on 'Full Visible Unity' (paragraphs 101 to 193) the position of each church is described and then points of convergence and of divergence (requiring further work) are noted. There is no suggestion that the two traditions have identical theologies of Church, ministry and oversight.

6.4.2 Both the Faith and Order Committee and the Law and Polity Committee of the Methodist Church in their responses ask therefore, from their particular perspectives, to what extent it is possible to speak of 'shared theological understandings'.

6.4.3 The Law and Polity Committee whilst emphasising that its concerns do not mean that the churches should not enter the Covenant is particularly concerned that words should be used in such a way that their meaning is clear to members of both communions, that in both communions particular words are understood in the same sense and that they should fully and accurately reflect each church's position. It therefore, for example, in dealing with 'shared theological understandings' spells out more fully than does the Common Statement the background to the references to priesthood in the doctrinal standards clause of the Methodist Church Deed of Union (cf. paragraphs 151-156).

6.4.5 The Faith and Order Committee refers to the many loose ends, theological and otherwise, that the Common Statement recognises still need to be worked on. It therefore goes on to offer the following construction as the sense in which the phrase 'shared theological understandings' could be received:

"We basically agree what the church, its mission and how it orders its ministries are about, but we acknowledge that within that basic common framework much teasing out is still necessary. We therefore choose to work on the disagreements having made a commitment to each other, rather than making agreement on the sticking-points a condition of our commitment."

It is in this spirit, we assume, that the words introducing the Affirmations and Commitments will be understood and received."

6.5.1 There are two references to **work that should take priority** if the governing bodies of the two churches agree to the proposed Covenant. The primary reference is in the text of the Covenant:

We commit ourselves, as a priority, 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. In particular, we look forward to the time when the fuller visible unity of our churches makes possible a united, interchangeable ministry. (Commitment 1)

One of the Recommendations also relates to it:

We recommend that the Joint Implementation Commission give priority in the next phase of our relationship to the question of the interchangeability of diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal ministries, on the basis of the theological agreement set out in the report. (paragraph 195, Recommendations to the governing bodies of the two churches, section 7)

6.5.2 Responses suggest that there is a range of views as to what should take priority if the two Churches enter into the Covenant. A few believe it should be possible to overcome remaining obstacles to unity very quickly and that therefore interchangeability of ministries could follow. This is the emphasis of the following motions passed by the Newcastle, Rochester and Southwark Diocesan Synods. A far more widely held view is that the Covenant should offer early encouragement to both Churches in practical working together particularly in mission. That is, in effect, to say that Commitment 2 should take priority:

We commit ourselves to realise more deeply our common life and mission and to share the distinctive contributions of our traditions, taking steps to bring about closer collaboration in all areas of witness and service in our needy world.

6.5.3 The joint liaison group recognises that if the two churches agree to enter into the Covenant the process of its becoming a lived reality in every part of both churches will become the critical issue. It therefore invites each governing body, if it agrees to enter into the Covenant, to encourage its practical outworking in both churches.

6.5.4 Commitment 1, with its reference to priority being given to the interchangeability of ministries, raises important issues for both churches. It is already recognised that further work together is required before it could become a reality. It is also the case, however, that progress on the issue depends on the completion of other work or processes already under way in each church. Obvious examples are the process of discernment and reception concerning the ordained presbyteral ministry of women and work on women and the episcopate within the Church of England and continuing work in Methodism on the ways in which acceptable forms of episcopacy could be developed. This suggests that the question of interchangeability of ministries is one among a number of priorities.

7.1 An Anglican-Methodist Covenant proposed a Joint Implementation Commission as the vehicle to be used to help both churches in carrying forward the work to which entry into the Covenant would commit them:

*We recommend that, subject to the making of the Covenant by the two churches, a Joint Implementation Commission be set up to carry forward the implementation of the above Commitments.
(Recommendation 6, paragraph 195)*

7.2 A first task for the Commission would be the question of priorities. The responses received have raised a variety of issues. The Commission would have to review the issues raised by the process of discussion in both churches including the debates in the Conference and the General Synod and any commitments entered into by either body in its responses to resolutions, notices of motion, memorials or following motions. It would also need to consider and propose to the two churches how to proceed with the further theological work identified in An Anglican-Methodist Covenant. It would need to ensure its proposals about priorities were consistent with the overall strategic vision of the two churches expressed for the Methodist Church in Our Calling and for the Church of England by the priorities of the Archbishops' Council. This very substantial task suggests that the Joint Implementation Commission should be asked to make its first substantive report to the two churches by July 2005. It is clear to the joint liaison group that the Commission's responsibility would be oversight of the work needed following on the signing of the Covenant. It would not itself be responsible for doing the work but for identifying the work to be done, finding ways of doing it and ensuring that it was done.

7.3 The joint liaison group proposes the following outline terms of reference for the Joint Implementation Commission:

1. The joint implementation commission shall consist of not more than six persons from each church, together with an ecumenical participant from the United Reformed Church. (Note: Names of proposed Methodist members will be brought to the Conference on the Order Paper. It is envisaged that up to five of the Church of England representatives [members and CCU staff] will be appointed by the Appointments Committee on advice from the CCU and that an episcopal co-chairman will be appointed by the Archbishops. The Commission would be encouraged to find ways of consulting with other partner churches.)
2. The role of the joint implementation commission shall be to monitor and promote the implementation of the Covenant. (Note: The joint liaison group recommends that the commission consider setting up a joint website devoted to the Covenant and including examples of local good practice in implementing it on the lines of Releasing Energy.)
3. The commission shall consider the issues for further work raised in An Anglican-Methodist Covenant, by the process of discussion in both churches and by the July 2003 debates in both churches, including any following motions and Notices of Motion that are passed.
4. The commission shall make recommendations to the two churches about any future formal theological work.
5. The commission shall be established for a period of five years, in the first instance, and shall make its first report to the two churches by July 2005.

8.1 The official United Reformed Church response will not be available until after the General Assembly which will meet from 5 - 9 July. However, the resolutions which the Ecumenical Committee is bringing to that Assembly have been shared with the joint liaison group and are set out in appendix 3.

8.2 The Assembly will be invited to welcome the Covenant as a significant move towards the unity of the Church of Christ to which the United Reformed Church is also committed. The Assembly will be asked to instruct the Ecumenical Committee to explore what further steps would be necessary for all three churches (with an openness to other partners) to form a covenantal relationship (as recommended in Conversations on the Way to Unity paragraph 74.III)

8.3 The Assembly will then be invited to affirm the agenda for further work as listed in paragraph 73 of Conversations on the Way to Unity, with the addition, as a matter of priority, of more work on how the ministry of the whole people of God may be more widely exercised and mutually recognised.

8.4 There will be a further resolution requiring the Ecumenical Committee, in any future conversations, to ensure that the Church of England is made fully aware of the United Reformed Church's concerns about the former's present limits to women's ministry and its established position in relation to the state.

9 The joint liaison group recognises the significance for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches of what is currently happening ecumenically in Wales and Scotland. Two Methodist Synods in England expressed concern that there should be sensitivity, if the Conference and General Synod decide to enter into an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, to the reality of the Methodist Church being a church in three nations. In Wales the longstanding ENFYS covenant which is multilateral is currently under review. In Scotland the report of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union offers a very different kind of proposal and process. The recognition of the different contexts of the three nations is important and is a significant part of the background for the debate on an Anglican-Methodist Covenant. The joint liaison group is sensitive that in a shared text such as this report it is not possible at every point to recognise the different circumstances for Methodists in Wales and Scotland. That applies particularly to the wording of Resolution 30/5 below.

10 As the joint liaison group has done its work it has recognised the common concern for mission and unity that is central to the life of both our churches. It has sensed our shared commitment to continuing to seek the mind of Christ and to being open to the leading of the Spirit. It is confident that we shall continue in every part of the life of our two churches to pray for one another and for our partner churches (including particularly the United Reformed Church) on the journey we share together.

RESOLUTIONS

30/3. The Conference receives the Report of the joint liaison group.

30/4. The Conference resolves to enter into the Covenant, consisting of a preamble, Affirmations and Commitments, set out in paragraph 194 of An Anglican-Methodist Covenant.

30/5. The Conference encourages the Districts, Circuits and local churches to continue to work with the dioceses, deaneries and parishes of the Church of England for a growing together in worship, prayer, mission and service and increased sharing of resources, planning and decision-making, wherever possible with other partner churches.

30/6. The Conference authorises the President, Vice-President and Secretary of the Conference to sign the Covenant on its behalf in the coming connexional year on a date and at a place to be agreed between the two churches.

30/7. The Conference approves the setting up of a joint implementation commission to monitor and promote the implementation of the Covenant.

30/8. The Conference approves the outline terms of reference set out in paragraph - above.

30/9. [details to appear on the Order Paper] The Conference appoints the following persons as the Methodist members of the joint implementation commission:

APPENDIX 2

A Comments on the pattern of voting

Thirty Synods and Y Gymanfa voted in favour by majorities that ranged from just over a simple majority (Channel Islands), to 61% (Liverpool), exactly two-thirds (Cumbria) right through to 100% (Cymru). South Wales did not vote on the resolution. The Scotland Synod (41% in favour of those present and voting) and the Shetland Synod (33.3% in favour of those present and voting) did not vote in favour.

The pattern of voting in circuit meetings was much more varied. Of the circuits that voted 464 voted in favour, 85 against and in 8 there was an equal number of votes cast for and against. Out of 614 circuit meetings that could have returned a vote no report was received from 44 circuits, 31 of them in Wales where the mind of the circuits was represented to Y Gymanfa which itself voted (see SO490(3)). Thirteen circuits reported that they had chosen not to vote. Most of those returned comments.

B Circuit and District comments

Thirteen out of thirty-three Synods sent comments to the joint liaison group. Some of these were reports of points arising from group work during the Synod or made during a formal debate. Others came by direction of the Synod and in a few cases the Synod expressed its views by voting on one or more additional resolutions.

Fifteen memorials were received from 14 circuit meetings. Comments were received from 118 circuits. As with the comments received from District Synods some were by way of report of the process followed in the Circuit or of issues raised during discussions in various settings. Some of the comments were from the circuit correspondent (usually the Superintendent minister or circuit meeting secretary); others came with the authority of the Circuit Meeting in the form of an agreed minute or of a resolution

passed with a record of votes for and against. In the analysis that follows no account is taken of the different degrees of authority behind the comments received.

It was clear that in some situations the process of study and consultation was seen as helpful in itself and in a few places it had led to a growth in understanding and fellowship between circuit and deanery. In other places people had experienced difficulty and frustration either because the material in the Common Statement or the wording of the Covenant itself was found difficult or confusing or because attempts to study it ecumenically, especially with local Anglicans, had proved difficult.

A number of issues were raised by many circuits and the list below shows in descending order the topics most commonly raised. In some cases there was a consistent concern being expressed. With most topics, however, although all the comments were on a single theme the range of views expressed differed considerably. For example, the comments about interchangeability of ministries were from circuits both for and against entering into the Covenant, from those who saw it as a high priority easy of achievement and those deeply pessimistic about whether it would ever be realised.

The list includes issues raised in more than ten comments with the figures in brackets indicating (number of circuits commenting; number of districts commenting):

- Women's ministry (36; 4)
- The importance of developing/sustaining relationships with other churches, especially the United Reformed Church (25; 2)
- 'Organic unity' and Commitment 1 (21; 4)
- The need for mutuality in the Covenant and interchangeability of ministries (21; 2)
- 'Establishment': church / state relations (18; 2)
- Difficulty with obscure / technical language, especially in Affirmation 6 (17; 4)
- Mission as priority in implementing the Covenant (17; 3)
- The importance of wide consultation ahead of future decisions (17; - plus 9; 1 reporting their wide process of consultation)
- The importance of affirming the local (16; 2)
- Concern at lack of local Anglican awareness of the proposed Covenant (16; 1)
- Issues associated with oversight: episkope and episcopacy; bishops (some comments associated with Affirmation 7) (15; 2)
- Affirmation of diaconal ministry as exercised in the Methodist Church and of a variety of lay ministries, including that of local preachers (14; 3)

- Concern that Methodist culture and identity would be under threat (14; 2) [One circuit was anxious lest the Church of England should feel a threat to its sense of identity]

Dozens of other comments were made by one or more circuits. Some of these were also the subject of memorials which will come before the Conference for specific reply. All comments have been logged. Some raise specific questions that will need answers if the two churches agree to enter into the Covenant. The joint liaison group proposes that those should be referred to the joint implementation commission for consideration. One example would be whether the position of ministers of other churches who are recognised and regarded by the Conference would be affected by entry into the Covenant.

Other comments

A number of comments expressing a range of views similar to those identified in the analysis above have been received from individuals, groups and churches. Some churches have also sent voting figures from a meeting of the Church Council or a specially convened General Church Meeting. All these have been logged.

The files and summaries of all comments will be available at the Conference if any member of the Conference wishes to see them.

APPENDIX 3

Summary of responses from other Churches and the Ecumenical Instruments

A: DENOMINATIONAL RESPONSES:

1. A resolution to be proposed at the United Reformed Church General Assembly in July

- Thanks God for the Anglican-Methodist covenant proposals “as a significant move towards the Christian unity for which we pray”
- Instructs the URC Ecumenical Committee to explore with the Church of England and the Methodist Church what steps are needed to form a covenant relationship between the three churches
- Thanks God for “Conversations on the Way to Unity” - the report from the informal tri-lateral conversations between the three churches
- Affirms the agenda for further work identified in paragraph 73 of “Conversations” but calls for additional priority work on the recognition of the ministry of the whole people of God within a covenantal relationship
- Requires the URC Ecumenical Committee “to keep before the Church of England our concerns about its present limits to women's ministry and our difficulties with its present established position.”

The resolution (of which the above is a summary) is, of course, open to amendment at the Assembly.

The URC Ecumenical Committee also comments:

- Two 'gospel' insights are highlighted by the URC's own experience of uniting:

i. To test whether proposals are faithful to God's purposes, ask: "Has the smaller partner been heard?"

ii. Healthy proposals will contain a fruitful tension between unity and diversity which must remain unresolved. Unity not uniformity is the goal.

- The URC is a church of three nations where the ecumenical challenges and opportunities are different. The whole URC is concerned with the developments in each part.
- The tri-lateral conversations, involving the URC alongside the Anglican/Methodist process, are important in the context of the large number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships where the three churches are major players.
- Every local church, district council and synod in the URC was therefore invited to study both reports and consider

i. Should the URC, if invited, be part of a similar covenant if the basis could be agreed?

ii. What key aspects of URC tradition or problematic aspects of other traditions would need to be addressed?

From the substantial number of responses it is clear that the agenda for further work outlined in the tri-lateral report is on the right lines.

2. A response from the Church of Scotland noted

- The Common Statement is shaped by the determination not to repeat the mistakes of the past.
- The number and nature of LEPs in England is clearly significant in making the covenant possible.
- The recognition of the need for healing memories is important and can only come about by being in covenant.
- The grounding in God's mission is important.
- It is suspected that there is greater diversity at the local level than is expressed in the Common Statement. It is often the non-theological aspects that prove significant. In relation to the Eucharist, for example, convergence in understanding and divergence in practice might prove difficult to resolve.
- The discussion of priesthood in the Common Statement came across as 'heavily Church of England' in feel. Do Methodists and Church of England mean the same thing by the phrase 'representative person' used in relation to the presbyterate?

- It was noticeable that no sign was given that the Church of England might ever change its position on the matter of lay presidency at the Eucharist.
- The key to theological convergence in the Common Statement is found in paragraph 173: “Both Anglicans and Methodists are aware of the substantial ecumenical consensus that recognises that ministry within the historic episcopate should be a feature of united churches.”

3. The Baptist Union of Great Britain

- “Within the context of the covenant, it is hard to see the emphasis on mission and evangelism which have been heralded.” It is urged that “the challenge of mission in the 21st century will more obviously drive, shape and influence [future] conversations.”
- “Unity in diversity is about integrity more than symmetry.” “Synergy rather than sameness is a compelling goal.” “We would urge caution in the next phase of discussions whenever the desire for organisational symmetry risks short-circuiting the road to genuine unity.”
- The Baptist Union recognises and appreciates the consistency between what is found in the Anglican Methodist covenant discussions and their own experience in the current informal discussions with the Church of England - especially on matters of baptism and apostolicity.
- The Baptist Union commends the dissenting voice of Christianity as a tradition in which Methodists have played a key role. “We believe that dissent in the future will not run along confessional lines. All the churches are called to be prophetic and this too must influence the shape of our ecumenical future.”

4. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

- “A catholic unity not only allows for but actually requires a legitimate diversity, given that the Church is always ‘incarnate’ in particular ages and cultures.”
- “We commend the willingness of an Anglican-Methodist Covenant to face up to real difficulties. Careful planning of a journey makes the journey easier in the long run.”
- “Visible unity involves more than simply agreement about individual elements of doctrine.” It must be expressed in a common life.
- “We would want to endorse all that is said positively about the nature of the Church” (in paragraphs 167-175) . . . however, . . . “Given the divided reality of the Christian church would it not be better to recognise degrees of participation in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” (rather than speak in the very polarised way in which paragraph 169 begins)?
- Has enough attention been paid to episcopate as a ‘focus for unity’?
- Does the relationship between ministerial priesthood and priesthood of all believers need further clarification in order to be consistent with ARCIC (MO13)?

- Anomalies in past agreements do not in themselves justify extending the anomalies to new agreements - e.g. the lay presidency exercised in some Porvoo Churches.

B: ECUMENICAL RESPONSES

1. *Observations from a response by Churches Together in England:*

- The Covenant acknowledges the need to articulate and heal memories. *Can this now be replicated at all levels of church life and with other traditions?*
- The Covenant expresses the conviction that unity and mission belong together. *How will this now be worked out in all dimensions of the life of the two churches?*
- The Covenant focuses on certain ecclesiological issues. *Can these now be considered within the perspective of other churches and of younger people?*
- There remains a diversity of opinion in both churches. *Doubts and anxieties must therefore not be regarded as disloyalty.*
- There are also diversities of experience. *The process of reception of the Covenant will be crucial to allay fears of loss of identity.*
- There is a danger that the conversations with the United Reformed Church may be undervalued. *Work arising from 'Conversations on the Way to Unity' must not be eclipsed.*
- A bilateral covenant which sets such store by the 'ecumenical convergence' found in 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry' could marginalise other churches. *The specific task of reconciliation between the two churches must not lead to the excluding of other relationships.*

The response from Churches Together in England also highlights

- The potential international significance of a Covenant between the 'home' churches of two world-wide communions
- The positive assurances given by both churches as to the priority of maintaining consistency between the Covenant and their conversations with other churches.
- The enormous practical and spiritual significance of making a covenant commitment. Both churches (with others), it is argued, urgently need to do further work on this.

2. A 'four nations' conversation within the Church Life Liaison Group of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland elicited the following comments:

- There was support for the covenant process even though there were some doubts about this method of advancing unity and some questions about the value of bilateral conversations.

- There was strong emphasis on the fact that there were different patterns and different ways to unity in the four nations and stronger recognition needed to be given to this and to the effects of devolution.
- The Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church of Ireland, both minority churches, signed a Covenant on 26 September 2002 with an emphasis on mission rather than theological issues. Two issues to be resolved in England do not affect the Irish churches: The Church of Ireland is not established and there is no bar to women being bishops.
- The Church of England perhaps needs to recognise more clearly that it is almost the only English-only Church in CTBI.

It was agreed that failure of the covenant process would have damaging effects more widely.

3. The Assembly of the Mission Partnership of the Milton Keynes Christian Council

- Highlighted the importance of persevering with the work arising from 'Conversations on the Way to Unity' involving Church of England, Methodist and United Reformed Churches
- Hoped that progress towards unity between the two denominations will not exclude other ecumenical partners
- Commended the developing pattern of shared oversight within the Milton Keynes Mission Partnership as a model for the wider church.

C: WORLD CHURCH RESPONSES;

1. Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (IASCER)

"IASCER welcomes the report "An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England" and commends the members of the formal conversations for this report, particularly for its fine sections on the history of the relationship and the healing of memories necessary in the way toward unity.

"The Commission acknowledges the importance of this dialogue, finds it consistent with the Anglican Communion's ecumenical agreements at similar stages, and awaits with interest the decisions to be taken by the Methodist Conference and the General Synod of the Church of England."

C. INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

Conversations on the Way to Unity, 1999-2001: The report of the informal conversations between the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

The Conference of 2002 commended the Report for study throughout the Church (both separately and in conjunction with the study of An Anglican-Methodist Covenant) and invited comments from synods, circuits and churches as well as individuals. At the same time it directed the Methodist members of the joint liaison group to consider the responses received concerning Conversations on the Way to Unity

and, in consultation with the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, to bring proposals to this year's Conference for carrying forward the further work identified in paragraph 73 of the Report and the three Recommendations in paragraph 74.

The further work identified was as follows:

- I. To examine together how far the different ways in which personal episcopate relates to apostolicity are contingent and how far they are a matter of theological principle.
- II. The place of ordination and authorisation in such ministries as the eldership and the many forms of lay leadership.
- III. A shared understanding of the nature of the Church and differing understandings of the path to full visible unity.
- IV. The ways in which personal episcopate is officially understood and actually practised in the three churches. (Because the Methodist and United Reformed Churches are committed to Christian unity in three nations, it would be useful to include the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales in this work.)
- V. The question of the relationship of baptism to membership, and membership to the ministry of the whole people of God.

There were three recommendations:

- I. To set up appropriate tri-lateral structures to enable existing bi-lateral relationships to become, where appropriate, fully tri-lateral.
- II. To carry forward the study of the issues identified above (I to V in the previous paragraph).
- III. For the three churches to explore together (but with an openness to other partners) what further steps would be necessary to make an English covenantal relationship between them.

There were relatively few responses from either synods and circuits or individuals and churches that dealt exclusively with Conversations on the Way to Unity but this was probably unsurprising given the interconnection of this Report and An Anglican-Methodist Covenant. The few that were received came from United Areas or circuits with Local Ecumenical Partnerships involving close relationships between the Methodist and United Reformed Churches. It was clear, however, that in many circuits (over 20% of those making comments on An Anglican-Methodist Covenant) it was considered important that a bilateral relationship with the Church of England should not develop at the expense of other relationships, particularly with the United Reformed Church.

The Faith and Order Committee made a separate response to Conversations on the Way to Unity. In addition to a number of detailed comments on the text, including matters of fact and of substance, the Committee was concerned about the relative weightings of Conversations on the Way to Unity and An

Anglican-Methodist Covenant. Individuals within the Committee felt that the former had barely been touched upon locally.

The response of the Faith and Order Committee also questioned whether there is consistency between the formal (Anglican/ Methodist) conversations and the informal, trilateral conversations. The Committee was also not persuaded that all three churches were using such phrases as 'full visible unity' and 'visible unity' as meaning the same thing. They asked whether 'an organically united Church' or 'organic union' or 'visible, organic unity' were equivalent to each other and wished for clarification.

The Faith and Order Committee commented:

Given the number of LEPs which exist involving Methodist and URC partners, it is recognised as vital that the Methodist Church continue to conduct its conversations in a number of different directions.

The recommendation of the joint liaison group, however, is that this can be achieved in the immediate future (and trilateral purposes best served) by including an ecumenical participant from the United Reformed Church on the Joint Implementation Commission where proposals for future work will be considered, co-ordinated and prioritised. It would therefore be for the Commission to propose ways to carry forward the further work identified above and the implementation of the recommendations. The Commission would have to establish priorities from all the matters referred to it.

In the event that the Joint Implementation Commission is not established it would be for the Conference to decide its own way of responding to Conversations on the Way to Unity.

RESOLUTION

30/10. The Conference receives the report.