

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2001 REPORTS

Ecumenical Issues

A. TOWARDS AN ECUMENICAL STRATEGY

Summary

This paper outlines an ecumenical strategy which, when its three aspects are taken together, constitutes a "whole Church ecumenism." Those three aspects are a vision of one Church for one World, a desire to share in a common life with all Christian people and a commitment to seeking the full visible unity of the Church.

Introduction

Since before the restructuring that led to the formation of the Connexional Team (1996) there has been an awareness of the need for the Connexion to make explicit its ecumenical strategy. The Methodist Council is charged with ensuring that "policies are considered and work is carried out in awareness of the Church's world-wide ecumenical relationships and commitments" (Standing Order 211(3)(v)). This year the Council has recognised that responsibility could easily go by default and therefore decided to set up its own ecumenical reference group. The group will seek to have an ecumenical overview and, as required, do work on the Council's behalf. One purpose of this paper is to offer a framework to guide that group in its work.

It is also timely to look at our ecumenical strategy now because in the next few years both the Connexion as a whole and the Conference will have major choices to make about future relationships with partner Churches. In the next few months reports will be published and begin to be received from some of the conversations in which the Methodist Church is engaged with other Churches. It will be important in receiving those reports to be aware of the wider ecumenical context and to have some sense of our current ecumenical relationships and commitments.

A. The big picture

It is claimed in the Connexional Team Development Plan to which the Conference will have been invited to give approval that:

The global and ecumenical dimensions of the 1996 Statement of Purpose are not left behind by *Our Calling*. Rather they are so fundamental to what it is to be the Church that they are always going to be part of the context in which we review our work. (See the Connexional Team Development Plan, paragraph 1.5.)

Those global and ecumenical dimensions are described later in the same paragraph as the 'big picture'. That is the starting point for an ecumenical strategy. In one sense 'global' and 'ecumenical' are almost synonymous. The Greek word *oikoumene* can mean 'the whole inhabited earth'. In that sense the ecumenical agenda is not narrowly about inter-Church relations but about the whole life of the world.

Although that is not a practical definition it does offer an overall framework within which to view our ecumenical work. We need to keep sharp and clear the vision that we are part of the one World Church living in a richly diverse world which God loves and in which the Church is called to share in the birth pangs of a new world, reconciled and renewed. This will be enabled through our relationships with partner Churches worldwide, the sharing of resources, giving and receiving in mission and involvement in worldwide ecumenical instruments, particularly the World Council of Churches and the World Methodist Council. Section III of the 1999 Conference Statement on the Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, is called 'That The World May Believe' and in its two parts, 3.1 Sharing in Unity and 3.2 The Whole Gospel for the Whole World, links the unity of the Church and its mission

...since the Triune God who commissions the Church is one, seeking to reconcile and to bring the world itself to a unity in Christ (3.2.1).

B. Together in a Common Life

The current theme of Churches Together in England (CTE) is *Together in a Common Life*. This is a paraphrase of the root meaning of a New Testament word, *koinonia*, that describes the life of the Church as communion both with God and with each other. Mutual sharing is therefore at the heart of Christian faith and life. This is central to the Methodist understanding of what it is to be Church and to the ecumenical journey.

It is fundamental to the environment in which the Christian pilgrimage is undertaken. It implies togetherness, mutuality and reciprocity, requiring mutual recognition and a common acceptance of each other's identity. The contemporary Inter-Church Process in Great Britain, involving as it does a commitment to explore together the experience of fellowship on pilgrimage, reflects this scriptural understanding of *koinonia*. Co-existence alone is not enough. *Koinonia*, and therefore ecumenism too, means a shared existence...

Koinonia, then, is fundamentally an experience, belonging to the whole people of God, not an abstract concept deriving from remote schemes for Christian unity. As such, it is 'more important than any particular model of Church union that we are yet able to propose... For believers it involves both communion and community.'

(Called to Love and Praise 3.1.8-9, quotation from Towards a Statement on the Church, a report of the joint commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (1982-86 Fourth Series), IV 23.)

This reality is experienced by Methodists in many different ways, ranging from the discovery of a shared experience of Christ through informal contact with Christians of other traditions through local Churches Together groupings to more formal, structured relationships and partnerships. These are very varied and take place in every part of the life of the Methodist Church: local Church, circuit, district and Connexion. They express in specific situations our intention of working and worshipping with other Christian Churches whenever that will help us fulfil our calling. Methodism is involved, for example, in well over 500 local ecumenical partnerships. Although the great majority is with Anglican, Baptist and United

Reformed Churches, they also include many other traditions. They are to be found in the inner city and the countryside, in the sharing of church buildings and in covenanted relationships serving a local community. They often involve sharing particular ministries in sectors of life and work such as industry (including agriculture), higher or further education, local broadcasting, public affairs and rural life. Many Chairs of District are signatories to Church Leaders' Covenants which include a commitment to prayer and study together. Deep personal relationships are often developed and these form the basis for their work both in fostering inter-Church relationships in their Districts and in sharing with others in the Church's mission to the wider life of society.

Our strategy is to promote and encourage in all possible ways the sharing in a common life, not least through taking our part in the appropriate ecumenical instruments in each part of the Church. So the Methodist Church plays a full part in the ecumenical instruments in Great Britain, notably the three national instruments (ACTS in Scotland, Churches Together in England and CYTUN in Wales) and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). Both directly and through CTBI we are fully involved in the Conference of European Churches as well as the World Council of Churches.

C. Towards Visible Unity

There is evidence of Methodist ecumenical understandings and commitments in various written documents. In recent years these include responses to particular statements by partner Churches (eg *Ut Unum Sint* from the Roman Catholic Church, in 1997 and 1998) or to ecumenical documents (eg *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* - the Lima text - from the World Council of Churches, in 1985). They may be part of an ecumenical process (eg the *Called to be One* process of Churches Together in England in the mid-1990s) or necessary in developing other work such as that on the diaconate (especially in the 1993 report) and on episcopacy (1998 and 2000). Those understandings and commitments are nowhere systematically brought together and stated in a formal way. That is consistent with our history and ethos.

Nevertheless in *Called to Love and Praise* (4.6) the connexional principle is expounded and its ecumenical implications are indicated:

At a time of ecumenical dialogue (Methodism) commends this principle to other Churches, at the same time acknowledging that connexionalism is compatible with the patterns of ministry treasured by other traditions (4.6.8).

and examples are adduced of lay eldership in the United Reformed Church and the readiness of the British Methodist Church to accept episcopacy in the form of bishops.

Furthermore *Commitment to Mission and Unity* (1997), the report that paved the way for the current Formal Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church, drew attention to the common understanding of the goal of visible unity it believed was shared between the two Churches. It expressed the conviction that:

The Church is called to make visible God's unity in both space and time. In space, the Church's unity is to be made visible locally, nationally and worldwide. In time, the Church is to make visible the unity of Christians which stretches from the Church of the apostles to the end of time. This is affirmed when we declare in the Creed our shared belief in the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church (II.9).

It went on to list four marks of a visibly united Church:

- (a) a common profession of the one apostolic faith ...;
- (b) the sharing of one baptism and the celebrating of one eucharist...;
- (c) a common ministry of word and sacrament...;
- (d) a common ministry of oversight (episcop^Ź)... (II.10);

and then to comment:

These characteristic elements of visible unity hold the Church's life together and enable us to share resources (personnel, expertise, buildings, administration, money) and to be accountable to one another... (II.11).

A reminder that visible unity should not be confused with uniformity is backed by a quotation from a Roman Catholic-Lutheran document: 'Unity in Christ does not exist despite and in opposition to diversity, but is given with and in diversity' (II.12).

Finally, the point is made that each stage on the way to full visible unity is only part of 'a wider ecumenical endeavour to which we are committed'. This commitment is not only for the sake of our mission ('witness in the world to the reconciling purposes of God') but because we are being called to become what, in God's gracious intention, we already are: one Church (II.14).

These extended quotations from Called to Love and Praise and Commitment to Mission and Unity make clear our dual responsibility both to be faithful to our own tradition and to be willing to share it with others and to be open to receive from others. The Methodist Church remains committed both to the search for full visible unity and to exploring with ecumenical partners what that will mean as we seek to be open to the gifts God still has to share with us through our developing relationships.

RESOLUTION

1. The Conference adopts the Report.